



Two faces of the feminist dystopia in the United Kingdom: Sophie Mackintosh and Rebecca Ley

A conversation with Sophie Mackintosh and Rebecca Ley

by Marta Olivi

In December 2020 and January 2021, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, I had the privilege of speaking with Sophie Mackintosh and Rebecca Ley, authors of two extremely interesting feminist dystopian novels, both published in the United Kingdom in 2018. Our discussions were enlightening not only as they constituted precious ground for the interpretation of the affective and familial bonds coursing their two debut novels, *The Water Cure* and *Sweet Fruit, Sour Land*; they were also valuable in framing such novels as aiming to rewire the conventions of the genre, especially concerning the ties between their dystopian setting and the real world outside the literary text, effectively inscribing these novels and authors in the transition period we are today witnessing concerning feminist dystopias (Dillon).

Our discussions, although primarily concerned on the analysis of their debut novels, always steered back to touch on the reality inhabited by the readership outside of the texts: the concrete reality of trauma embedded in the body as well as in the memory, the immanent presence of various epidemics—broadly intended both as medical emergency and as, for example, the surge of violence against women—and, finally, the state of global current affairs which inevitably link the public sphere to the private experience. An example of this are the rising food prices mentioned by Ley,



which have connected the day-to-day life of citizens living in very different historical and political situations, from Brexit, to the Arab Springs, to the empty supermarkets characterising the Covid-19 pandemic. Such complex relationships between reality and fiction are also demonstrated by the wide array of influences which the authors have cited: from climate non-fiction to the surrealism of Angela Carter and the symbolism of *The Virgin Suicides* (1999).

For these reasons, the material lives of the women represented in the novels come across as symbolizing the very concrete conditions of existence of women today—Mackintosh herself uses the word “allegory”, when describing her particular stance towards the critical feminist dystopia. The same objective is sought by Ley, who, through the theme of food, carries out a materialistic critique to those very capitalistic ideals which influence political and economic choices of real life governments, to the point of being the primary cause of the environmental crisis that could lead to the instauration of the dystopia she depicts. Acknowledging both the real and the fantastic components of their world-building, such novels recognise and fulfil the overall aim of dystopian narration: symbolising and, to some extent, influencing our society.

INTERVIEW WITH SOPHIE MACKINTOSH

(Email, January 2021)

SOPHIE MACKINTOSH was born in South Wales in 1988 and is currently based in London. Her fiction, essays and poetry have been published by *Granta*, *The White Review*, *The New York Times*, and *The Stinging Fly*, among others. Her short story “Grace” was the winner of the 2016 White Review Short Story Prize, and her story “The Running Ones” won the Virago/Stylist Short Story competition in 2016. Sophie’s debut novel *The Water Cure* was published by Hamish Hamilton in the UK in Spring 2018 and by Doubleday in the US in early 2019 and was long-listed for the Man Booker Prize. Her second novel *Blue Ticket* was published in Summer 2020 to critical acclaim.

Marta Olivi: Your first novel, *The Water Cure* (2018), has been by many included in the dystopic genre, especially in the light of your second one, *Blue Ticket* (2020), which is openly set in a different, although plausible, society. However, the *fil rouge* of your narrations seems to be resonance with our time. Many novelists today choose dystopias and similar modes of fiction to comment on something in our real, extraliterary world which is particularly important to them. For this reason, I would like to know what your inspirations for your first novel were. Here I mean inspiration in a broad sense, coming from current events, for example the apparently incurable epidemic of violence against women, but I am also curious about which novels and/or films inspired you, or if some movements and currents, both inside and outside feminism, affected your ideas.



Sophie Mackintosh: When writing *The Water Cure* originally, I was mostly focused on the relationship between the sisters, and how this relationship had been changed by an unnamed cataclysm that had led to the arrival of the men. As I wrote more of the story, and as I redrafted, the focus changed gradually to this idea of the literally toxic masculinity. So, while I didn't set out explicitly to comment on anything in particular, it was impossible to keep the world—a world of the Brexit vote, Trump coming to power, stories of violence against women—from influencing the novel. It was my own personal anger and reckoning too that influenced the novel, as well as what was happening in the world around us, and continues to happen. I was inspired by both the film and novel of *The Virgin Suicides* (1993; 1999) and its emphasis on shut-away sisters, the film *Valerie and her Week of Wonders* (1970) for its surreal and wonderfully aesthetic take on young female sexuality and purity, and the novel *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) by Angela Carter for the symbolism and sense of awakening.

Marta Olivi: I have found that in your first novel it is particularly difficult to understand if we are in a dystopia or if we are in a separate corner of our real world. We find ourselves to share the daughters' lack of knowledge, and we are unsure whether to trust the girls' parents: we do not know if the men-provoked toxicity claimed by King and by Mother is real, and as the novel ends with the sisters passing the border, we are left with this doubt. In the final scenes of the novel, James reveals to Grace that the situation in the outer world, in the "mainland", is very different than what the sisters believe it to be: in his description we see that the mainland is actually very similar to the world we readers live in, where women are endangered by toxic masculinity and violence against women, but where they can find spaces for alliance and resistance as well. To what extent we should trust James, here? Would you define your novel as a dystopia, as a metaphorical allegory, or as something different and in-between?

Sophie Mackintosh: I would say it's something between these things and like to keep a certain ambiguity—I like that readers will have different reactions and interpretations, and that it can be read as very much allegorical. There is something affecting women, but as James says, it's not as bad as the girls have been told it is. But when James says it, there is this double edge to it—is he being truthful, or downplaying the pain of women? Are they being trapped or protected? And also, how can we ourselves really know in our own world what is best for us? So, in that way it does reflect the experience of being in our own, uncertain, and shifting, world too.

Marta Olivi: The health problems of the women who came to the island to seek shelter seem to point towards a wholly dystopic interpretation of the novel, as they seem to reinforce the parents' narration of men as vectors of disease, inflammation, and poisoning. As a matter of fact, the sisters themselves bear testimony to the trauma of these women, a trauma which is inscribed on their bodies. But on a closer inspection, it can be argued that the symptoms they experience—hair loss, laboured breathing, skin problems, nosebleed—might be a psychosomatic post-traumatic reaction to masculine acts of violence. Even the symptoms against which the sisters themselves are guarded



may be caused by Mother and King themselves, as a consequence of their poor health and diet, or of the abuse they endure. I of course do not want to ask you to solve this ambiguity, but I would like to know, what do women's bodies tell us about their psychological state? Can we really safeguard our health and survival by refusing any bodily encounter and flushing away everything that might poison and hurt us, as King and Mother would like their daughters to do? Is it possible to hide inside our bodies as the sisters hide in their "island", or are women's bodies as permeable as the "island" itself, which, as we find out at the end, has been part of the mainland all along?

Sophie Mackintosh: I think whatever trauma our bodies experience does come out, maybe even more so if we try to deny or ignore it. There is still very much we don't know about these kinds of experiences on the body, and when it comes to specifically female pain there is even less attention to given to it. But I don't know if we can safeguard ourselves through a vigilant routine or purification and fear, these trauma-avoiding behaviours, which trap the sisters in a different, more subtle, way. We can do our best to hide inside our bodies, but the world has a way of intruding, and also, I don't know how sustainable, or desirable, it is to shut out the world entirely. That's why, when the sisters start to move towards the Mainland, I wanted it to give a sense of hope—that the therapies haven't worked, purification hasn't worked, but maybe there's another way for them.

Marta Olivi: The pages written in bold in the second section, interspersed with chapters, were particularly interesting for me. We are not openly told what they are, but it is arguable that they are part of the Welcome Book in which the damaged women wrote their experiences. These are again part of the ambiguity of the novel: they may seem to reinforce the idea of a masculine toxicity in the air, but I found they could also poignantly describe the experience of being a woman today, uniting a bodily, material point of view to a sort of "magically realist" prose. These "damaged women", from the denomination itself, are the utmost demonstration that women must bear on their body the consequences of the traumas they endured. As a matter of fact, we do not know which traumas they experienced, we only know the traces they left on their bodies. Why do you think the female body is often regarded and treated as a recipient of pain, of violence, of traumas? How can it be opened to bodily, material pleasure, without having to lay itself bare to violence at the same time? What can we learn from Lia's experience in this sense?

Sophie Mackintosh: I do think now that as time goes on, as a writer, I want to pay attention more to these ways of bodies experiencing pleasure rather than to put my characters through pain; not to deny that the pain exists, but there is the worry that I'm perpetuating or even glorifying it. It's a hard balance to strike, between giving voice to something and being gratuitous, even when I know from my own intentions that gratuitousness is absolutely not my aim. Lia really throws herself into this possibility of pleasure in a way that's quite joyous and naive, and while she does suffer from it, I'm interested in exploring the balance between what we can bear in order to feel joy—how



the pendulum swings for us between pain and pleasure, what is worth it, and what is not.

Marta Olivi: It is fascinating that even though Mother and King speak as if they want to restore nature and a healthy state for their daughters, life on the island does not come across as healthy at all. Shifting our focus to the environment they live in, it is clear that it is far from ideal, from rubbish in the garden to lack of care in the household. Nature in particular seems to try and suffocate human life: hornets, snakes, hot temperatures. Dead animals are found everywhere, and nothing seems to grow in the garden. The environment seems the biggest threat to the survival of the girls, especially as they find themselves unable to gather food for themselves, and their perception of their surroundings is layered with their own terrors, such as ghosts at sea, and the border in the forest. Are their fears justified? Is the environment in the novel to be counted among dystopian features of the novel, or is the sisters' feeling that the sky will, eventually, "fall on them" part of their psychological conditioning to bodily survival at all costs?

Sophie Mackintosh: I wanted to create an environment in which nothing could be trusted, to mirror their mindset—they don't know what is safe, what is the real threat, and this extends to the natural world around them. I also grew up in beautiful wild countryside (the Welsh coast), so I have a lot of respect for nature generally, its beauty and also its power. I love to look at things we take for granted in a slightly sideways way, to think about how if seen or interpreted from a different angle even something we take for granted as safe and mundane can seem frightening, mysterious; the hidden layers of strangeness in our everyday environments. There is an intensity to the natural world in *The Water Cure* that I do feel sometimes in our own world, but it's an intensity of perception, a hyper-awareness, and it's this in the novel too.

Marta Olivi: How does it make you feel, in the midst of a global pandemic, to think that two years ago you wrote a novel where people are so scared of possible toxicity that they live detached from society, are forced to a form of love that excludes touch, and wear muslin on their mouth as a mask? Of course, you could not know that Covid-19 would eventually sweep the whole planet, but do you think you may have channelled a fear that runs deep in our society, the fear of contamination in a world that is turning more and more toxic by the day? How do you think this fear affects women in particular?

Sophie Mackintosh: It's strange, definitely—I am a bit freaked out! But yes, perhaps that fear of toxicity, and also I think a fear of our emotions, a fear of intimacy, how to get what we need without being hurt. I think for women in particular there is so much discourse around the idea of goodness and purity, in everything from the food we consume to childbirth. As if we could stick to these 'good' things and somehow absolve ourselves. But harm is always there, there's no way to protect ourselves completely, the world is always waiting for us. We need new ways of guarding ourselves, or maybe the answer is in opening up in different ways, I don't know—I'm still learning and thinking about it all the time, the possibility of expansiveness rather than guarding, and figuring out how to do this, especially now.



INTERVIEW WITH REBECCA LEY
(Zoom, 9th of December 2020)

REBECCA LEY is a London-based writer of essays and fiction. Her essays have been published in *Wander Magazine*, a three-part literary journal she co-founded; *Water Journal*; and *The Tangerine Magazine*. She was shortlisted for the Fitzcarraldo Essay Prize 2017. Her first novel, *Sweet Fruit. Sour Land* (2018), was published by Sandstone Press. It won the Guardian's Not the Booker prize 2018, was shortlisted for the Kitschies debut novel award, and won a Betty Trask Award.

Our dialogue started with an inquire of the contextual inspiration that led Ley to choose the form of the dystopia for her debut novel; many themes seemed to be deeply influenced both from the political climate of Europe, and the United Kingdom in particular, of the last five years, but they also seem to come from a literary context that increasingly resorts to dystopia to communicate both private and public anxieties by means of a process of catachresis (Cavalcanti, 2003). We started approaching current affair themes which are present in the novel, such as climate change and climate migrations, the exploitation of migrant labour, the impact of Brexit on borders politics, and inevitably the discussion shifted to how the situation changed from the time the book was written (2016) to our contemporaneity.

Rebecca Ley: It's quite a weird situation to find myself in, I started writing in 2016 so, four years later, people keep saying to me, "Oh your book made all of this [Covid-19 pandemics] happen!", for example when the supermarket ran out of food, which of course was not the case! I wrote the book in 2016, around the Brexit vote, although it had not quite happened yet but there was a feeling in the air. My initial starting point was actually the food theme, I wanted to write about a world without food because I think that our relationship with food is really interesting: how it has cultural significances but is also linked to personal memories and nostalgic feelings. How would you feel if you lived in a world in which the material means of all of these significances were stripped away? For example, the image of the lemon that is in the *Prologue*, it is inspired by a piece of conceptual art from Zoe Leonard, called *Strange Fruit*. At the time it represented her friend who she lost during the AIDS crisis: it hit me as a striking image, and that's where I started from. I kind of liked the idea of taking something so normal, that we take for granted—of course you can go to the supermarket and buy a lemon, and you'll always be able to find a lemon—but what if someone found a lemon and that was the most amazing thing that ever happened? That was the initial inspiration. Then of course there was the influence of Brexit, Donald Trump's border politics, and with the climate crisis worsening every year, the context of the novel has become even more relevant now. Coming to my literary influences, I read *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) when I was a teenager, and that kind of sparked my interest; I don't think I read any climate dystopia, I can only think of Megan Hunter's *The End We Start From* (2017), where London is underwater, but it is not very explicit on the reasons why. My starting point was rather non-fiction about climate change: I wanted it to be an element of truth, when I decided that would have been my backdrop. I am not a scientist but there are quite a few things that could feasibly happen, and that stem from anxiety of what could be the future of society: we are already seeing some of it, for example, some countries becoming unliveable, and prompting mass migrations. The main starting point in the novel was imagining the North of the world closing their borders and becoming even more closed off and against immigration. After all, the influence of climate



on politics is undeniable, for example the influence on the Arab Spring through the rising food prices, and so on.

It was remarkable to discover the extent of the scientific study that supports the dystopian world-building in *Sweet Fruit, Sour Land*; the plausibility of the public context is especially useful in making the novel a cautionary tale, fulfilling one of the aims of critical dystopias (Moylan), but it is also crucial in supporting the private developments of the protagonist which were, allegedly, Ley's main concern. Indeed, it was particularly interesting to see how the theme of food seen from a private point of view is the core theme of the novel, the first material inspiration, and that the dystopian setting is built around it to carry out a narrative effect of cognitive estrangement (Suvin). Our dialogue went on to cover this duplicitous aspect of food; I asked Ley about the significance of food in the essays she has published on her website *Notes from a writer*¹ in the period of time that was coming up to the publication of *Sweet Fruit, Sour Land*. Food is one of the most recurrent themes among the essays collected on Ley's website, where it is interestingly used to materialise a wide range of feelings and emotions. For instance, *Comfort food* (2017) describes food's capability of incarnating all human fears and paranoias, as well as representing moments of happiness in a material shape or taste that comes to be the most tangible part of one's memories of that moment; the same ambiguous potentiality of food is patent in the novel, although influenced by the situation of scarcity. Moreover, food can also bridge relationships with others and materialise feelings of affection and love, as described in *Lasagna and love* (2018). The materiality of food, in these depictions, is never abandoned, and the physical perception of it through the senses is the most visible narrative aim of these works. For this reason, it was particularly interesting to inquire why, in the novel, the materiality of food is instead its most depreciative feature, being incompatible with the attachment of any real meaning to food, especially when it comes to convey affection and familiar feelings.

Rebecca Ley: I started with the idea of stripping away food and was left with a landscape where you have to learn to love people without food being a part of your ritual; I think that, as part of our cultural identity, food is such a huge thing, it is like a shared language that we have. Food is also a part of shared cultural events, it is the main part of Christmas, for example, and it is a way of bringing people together and celebrate. It was interesting to turn that on its head, thinking food in terms of these elaborate parties which are a huge extravagance and serve to highlight the disparities between the rich and the poor, and show how the people who have food do not appreciate it and use it as a sort of status symbol. You could draw it on history, it has happened and will continue to happen. In terms of family, I wanted to connect the memories of the protagonists with food; in Mathilde's memories of Paris and her mother, she is always thinking of what she is eating. Food is an easy thing to connect with people you love, it's a huge part of our way to connect with others and building a shared history. It was important that there was a material backdrop of food that characters could remember but could not find anymore. Many people who read it found this quite hard, it made them think how lucky they were to be able to still access the food they love.

¹ Retrieved from: Ley's blog, Notes from a writer: <https://rebeccasarahley.wordpress.com/>



Following on this catachresised dystopic construction of food in absentia, where the materiality of food is negatively connoted, and where the lost flavours and smells haunt the protagonists through memories, I asked Ley about the significance of memory and nostalgia surrounding food: they can bridge memories and positive feelings about lost homelands and families, but in the novel the process of remembering is also often characterised as tricky and deceiving. Throughout the novel, memories of food seem to be the positive escape from the dystopia, but memories of lost relatives are not the libidinal and affective recovery that allows the positive ending; they are rather an escapist mechanism, whereas the real positive open ending is given by the construction of a concrete family as a private safe space that does not respond to the commodifying logic of the dystopia. The ambivalence between the two positions is therefore deeply linked to the theme of food and especially to the way food is used to build a space of resistance in the dystopia.

Rebecca Ley: Nostalgia and looking back on our past is part of the human condition, isn't it? And for some people this nostalgia is probably what Freud would call pathological, something you cling to, and you can't let go of; and you make it a part of your present in an unhealthy way, and that's something I wanted to explore with Jaminder, she's way more pathological in her way of looking to the past. I didn't notice until I finished the novel that the main feature that distinguishes the two is how they deal with situations; Mathilde is much more closed off and uses memories of food to gain strength, she seems more balanced between past and present, and she wants to forget things which happened and live in the present, whereas Jaminder dwells in her past to the point of hallucinating things. For me, it was sort of a way of exploring two sides of my own personality: sometimes I have days when looking back consumes me, and days where I do not want to think about it at all. Everyone does that, they have different ways of dealing with their losses. With Jaminder I wanted to explore what happens when you take that much further: she ends up living in her own magic world, she clings onto the past in an unhealthy way, but who is to say what is healthy and unhealthy, after all.

This discussion of memory and nostalgia, especially linked to family situations, brought the dialogue onto the immediate inspiration that sparked the dystopia, a personal situation of loss that Ley describes in another essay, *How to write a novel* (2018): the death of her father pushed Ley to transform her personal sense of grief into a public projection, a dystopic world where isolation and loneliness are the main feelings, and where, significantly, not only food is stripped away of its meanings, but also fatherhood is nowhere to be found. The only character that resembles a father figure in the novel is Jaminder's grandfather, who is also the only adult masculine figure and who is present through Jaminder's acts of remembering. Moreover, the only living positive masculine character is Hugo, the son of Jaminder and Mathilde, who significantly represents hope for the future, for a potential better way of constituting families and to weave relationships between genders.

Rebecca Ley: There were two things that happened close together; my father died, and the week before he died, my nephew was born. For me, it was quite an obvious link between the two extremes of the circle of life; when writing, it was easy to configure Hugo as a part of a future generation, and although it is clearly not a nice world for him, I wanted that to feel hopeful. I knew that in my novel there weren't many male characters, but it's funny because I always think



that now many books written by women are commented upon, but I grew up reading a lot of books written by men where there weren't many women, or there weren't many women who played a particular role. So, when I wrote my book, I thought, I want to write about women. And it felt like a sort of safe space, at the time. But the writing process was definitely a reaction to my dad's death, I felt this huge sense of urgency. A lot of the book is fairly dark, and it is about loss, but writing it in this way was a way of writing about everything that happened without directly addressing it. It is interesting that father figures are absent, to the point that Jaminder has a grandfather in place of a father, I hadn't really thought about that! Maybe I was avoiding the idea of fatherhood, it was easier at the time to explore loss through women characters, and how they deal with it.

The discussion of sense of loss as deeply intertwined with the sense of family is useful to understand why family contexts in the novel are built on an immaterial plan that excludes any material fulfilment of the sense of affection, given the material absence of the person who is missed, and also the irretrievability of that food that is linked to them. Moreover, it is also useful to understand the concept of motherhood in the novel, imbued with loneliness and isolation: as was said, fatherhood is completely excluded in the novel, both from a private point of view, as both Jaminder, Mathilde and Hugo do not have fathers, and from a public point of view, as the pro-natality policies fall solely on the mothers and do not require father figures. For this reason, motherhood becomes then the focal point of the capitalist commodification taking place in the novel; yet, from the most exploited thing there is, Jaminder, Mathilde and Hugo create a locus of resistance and hope. After having talked about the importance of female characters, Ley went on to talk about the role of women and domestic spaces in her dystopia.

Rebecca Ley: I read a book recently about climate change and one of the things they said, which is obvious I suppose, is that we should really consider whether we want to have more than one child; but in the world we're living in the most pressing question is, should we really have children at all. Once I decided that climate change would be the backdrop of the novel, it seemed that one of the most important topics to explore was whether you would want to have children in such a situation; so I created this world where people were forced to, even if they didn't want to. I don't have children, at the time I was just thinking whether it was a moral choice to have a child or not; although I wrote a dystopia, it is not far removed from the world we live in now, so it's still a question that a lot of people of our generation are struggling with. I still felt that, in my own life, being around children is always a positive thing, and although there's this anxiety about whether to have them, when you're with them you forget about these external anxieties: the innocence of children is a sort of balm to the outside world, because they don't know about climate change, or pandemics, or this sort of stuff. So I wanted to end on a positive note. Every generation has had their crises, although ours seem worse, for the past generation there were fears of nuclear wars and so on, so it [having children] is sort of an eternal question. There's always a lot of pressure from society to have children in a nuclear family environment, and it's unusual to encounter two parents who are women in literary fiction, even though it shouldn't be. When I was thinking about having children in a world like the one in the novel, where nothing is traditional, it felt like the natural conclusion of the relationship between Jaminder and Mathilde.

Talking about children and familiar roles, and the salvific role given to Hugo, the discussion shifted onto another relationship that defies the commodifying rules of the dystopia and which is left open to interpretation: the one between Mathilde and Jaminder. As was said, every public change in the dystopia yields some change in the



private, affective and social sphere: it is therefore interesting to see such effects not only on familiar bonds, as was already discussed, but also on romantic relationships and how they are connected to childbearing and family-building. It is tenable that, in such a materialistic setting as the one in the novel, true love and the materiality of bodies cannot coincide: the sexual relationship between George and Mathilde is only framed as part of George's inseminating plan, and the other significant relationships in the novel, the ones between Gwen and Gloria, and Gloria and Frank, and Mathilde and Jaminder, are blurred between friendships and romantic relationships. The opinion of Ley on this is particularly interesting as the novel willingly withholds information from readers, especially as per what concerns the protagonists: it never clarifies if the relationship between Mathilde and Jaminder is physical or platonic, and it even deceives them, as, when Hugo appears in Jaminder's narration, readers are led to believe that Mathilde is his biological mother, while it is later disclosed that she is actually Jaminder. Such revelation comes as a surprise to readers, who have previously assisted to Mathilde being raped by George and have been told that Jaminder has undergone surgery to become sterile: this contributes to the impression of irrelevance of the biological, bodily dimension of affective, familiar relationships.

Rebecca Ley: I find it interesting what people interpret from it [the relationship between Mathilde and Jaminder] because it says a lot about our own relationships and what we deem as traditional. To me, their relationship felt very romantic even though nothing physical might have happened; it was the most romantic relationship in the book, a very intense female friendship. There is ambiguity about whether it was physical, whether it was linked to sexual feelings, or whether it was just a friendship; to me, it was just about exploring the romance of female friendship, which, even when it is platonic, it can sometimes feel very intense and have as much significance in a lot of women's lives as a sort of romantic relationship, which I think is quite interesting. Most of the romantic relationships in the book are sort of flawed, not quite right, just a physical thing, or the opposite. But it was interesting to explore these; I found it quite hard to write about people just happy and in love. If you put your characters in difficult situations, where something is wrong, that's when you see how they react and how they really are, and that's why it was interesting to turn things on their head. When I wrote the novel, I thought, people are going to read this and have their assumptions also about who is the biological mother of Hugo. But why is it so important, why is the physical, biological side of it so important? Actually, people that you're not related to you by blood can feel like family, whereas people of your biological family, sometimes you want to kill them! And especially with motherhood, there's a lot of emphasis on women on bearing their own children, but I don't think it is so important when it comes to being a mother, and both Mathilde and Jaminder are Hugo's mothers.

To conclude our interview, the discussion was again led towards Ley's essays, being the literary form that Ley has most pursued before the publication of *Sweet Fruit, Sour Land*, where most of the themes of the novel can be found. In *On Efficiency* (2017), the topic of productivity at all costs is analysed from the point of view of a writer, whose activity is hard to combine with the capitalistic logic of maximising outcomes. It was extremely interesting to see this critique to productivity and consumerism, which constitutes a great part of the dystopian episteme of the novel, in an essay antecedent to the publication of the novel, but subsequent to its writing.



Rebecca Ley: [Productivity] It's an interesting topic, because as a writer, or as a student, you feel that there's a certain obligation that you should be working as hard as possible all the time: there's no time limit or off-switch. When I wrote this essay—I wrote it quite quickly, compared to other things I've written—I had a full-time job at the time and I still worked in the weekends, in the evenings, and it bled into the rest of my time. Afterwards, when I read my essay, or maybe it was during, I thought, what is this obsession with being productive? In the eyes of society, we feel that we have to produce a certain amount of work, whether that's written work or whatever, and we have to think that we are useful, and that the people who don't work, or work less, or can't work, are less useful: when you think about it, it's crazy, and it just doesn't make sense. When I wrote that, I was thinking about the kind of fight that's going on inside most of us, between wanting to produce work and be productive, and having leisure time—it's not actually about having leisure time, we're lucky because most of us can have it, but the problem is in feeling guilty while not being productive. The drive to write, inside, I think it's linked to the push to produce, a lot. I do not know what my motivation is, but I think the healthiest people are those who can work, and just set it aside, and forget about it, and do something completely unproductive and enjoyable. Especially now that a lot of people are working from home, it is difficult to make a separation between work and free time. But also, in the United Kingdom we have a problem with productivity; if you read statistics, we're actually quite unproductive if you measure it against our GDP, and no one can work out why, compared to other countries. It's not that easy to assess productivity, of course that depends on some cultural norm, for example in Japan they work longer hours and that of course impacts their productivity. But I think we do have a sort of productivity problem, but only in relation to our output: we work a lot, but we don't create as much as we should, in terms of the economy. Which is interesting to think about, because, so what? That's only important if you think that economic success is the best measure of a country's success. Even the fact that people talk about this as a problem it's quite funny, it's an economic measure, but we don't talk about how important it is to just do things for the sake of doing them. We live in a world where everything has to have a purpose, and a point, you can't just sit and think; many people find that weird, but it's nice to do things that have no purpose. And it extends to relationships too, there are some that are "unproductive" as they oppose the status quo, such as people who don't have children, and that's why it is traditionally considered threatening. But writing about those relationships was interesting to me because it was a way to explore marginalised people, including women and LGBTQ+ people. I think part of the reason they are seen as threatening, and their relationships as well, is that they go against these societal norms.

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