Kalliope Lee, *Sunday Girl*. London: Psychopomp Press, 2013. 372 pp. ISBN 957632142.

This debut work by Kalliope Lee is both a riveting and, at times, confusing read. There are many merits to it, but there are also certain problems that, as I have observed, seem particularly apparent in first novels. Let me, at the outset, clarify my position with regard to this narrative: it was enjoyable and I found the story compelling – a large part of it is due, admittedly, to my interest in narratives that have strong gothic sentiments. In this regard, my criticism is meant to highlight what I believe are "teething" issues with new writers. Another important qualifier I need to emphasise is that my viewpoint is primarily a reader's, and is thus based on what I, as a reader, would expect from a novel. Hence, while I am also a literary critic, I try my best to underplay the inclination to subscribe a work I am reviewing to literary analysis and provide, instead, feedback as someone with a vested interest in being entertained by a good book.

Briefly, *Sunday Girl* recounts the intricate friendship between Sybil and Jang-Mee, two Korean women who grew up in the US but have returned, for different personal reasons, to their home country, where they not only rekindle their trauma-inflected affection for each other, but also embark together on a strange, difficult and harrowing emotional journey that will analogously resurrect some of the most painful moments in Korea's long history of colonisation and oppression. While it is not meant as a summary in a single sentence, my statement does convey the complexity and ambitiousness of Lee's novel. Indeed, the writer's ability to straddle multiple streams of narrativity and enjoin them to larger social and cultural issues implicated by Korean history, *as well as* make intertextual references to pop culture, Greek classics and other literary and philosophical works in order to provide some reading coordinates, is no small feat and represents Lee's "esemplastic" (to use a word coined by Coleridge that did not, unfortunately, become currency in the English language) capacity to draw textual parallels with various sources without digressing (for the most part) from a riveting plotline.

The numinous element is also well handled, and for me, the story's most successful feature. The two women's friendship was star-crossed from the point of their introduction when, still back in the States, an unwitting excursion led them directly to Jang Mee's rapist. While Sybil lay unconscious after being struck, Jang Mee experienced physical and emotional wounds that will not only scar her for life, but inflict on her spiritual trauma when another dimension within her being was unlocked to supernaturally connect her to the dead. Henceforth, this encounter will become Jang Mee's lifelong quest: to discover the identity of a ghost girl with whom she identified with on that fateful night –

a quest that will compel her return to Korea. Sybil, who initially does not understand what draws her to Jang Mee, will subsequently learn that she too possesses a similar gift/curse; but as the stronger of the two, she is not only able to bear her ability in a more level-headed way, but is tasked to somehow save Jang-Mee from her path to certain self-destruction. Further complicating this story is also Jang Mee's attempt to learn of her own birth-mother and the reason she chose to give her daughter up for adoption. These two narrative streams provide a fascinating basis for *Sunday Girl*'s foray to literary works that references the underworld such as various Greek Classics and Dante, to the history of the forced sexual enslavement of Korean women by Japanese soldiers during the Second World War known today as the comfort women phenomenon (a phenomenon that the Japanese government continues to deny hitherto), and to a discourse on shamanism, which is not only a predominantly female preoccupation in Korea, but also one that is intricately linked to the nation's history.

For me however, the novel's main strength lies in its ability to cultivate relatable characters and well-executed dialogues. The reader is quickly acquainted with an array of colourful individuals, and some of them – like Min, Sybil's neighbour and sound-technician extraordinaire – are such affable creations that they gradually grow on you and engage your sympathies. The tragic-figure Jang Mee, who would be difficult to manage even by a seasoned writer, is efficiently configured by Lee so as not to come across as either overwhelming or maudlin. But it is the protagonist Sybil that, I believe, poses the most difficulty for the author to develop, simply because the reader's identification with her must remain ambiguous. As her namesake's reference to the prophetess in Greek mythology implies, Sybil is a character of many dimensions, whose identity is profoundly mysterious even to herself. Reading the novel, I find myself wavering between feeling sorry and disgust for, and being supportive of, her as she struggles between coming to terms with her own powers, learning to live comfortably in her own skin, and assuming the role of her friend's salvation. In the end, that she purportedly fails (I say purportedly because the denouement harbours a degree of uncertainty) in her latter endeavour only deepens the pathos of the story and reinforces its underlying subtheme of how genuine concern and good intentions are sometimes not enough to deliver a person. Lee has a good ear for dialogues and this ensures their liveliness and prevents them from becoming tiresome. Her dialogues, moreover, rather than merely exchanges to advance the story, has an indirect function of commenting on various aspects of Korean culture (like customs and food) and contemporary history, such as the political partisanship that continues to separate North and South Korea and the adoption of Korean children by Americans. This is, moreover, done in such a palpably seamless way

that the entire effect seems effortless. Here again is evidence of my point about Lee's care to avoid being laborious with her conversations.

It is perhaps unfortunate then, that what constitutes the novel's strengths equally play up to its weaknesses, as this paragraph and the next will demonstrate. S*unday Girl,* as mentioned, is an ambitious novel that diverges into different thematic and plot strands. However, this often leaves some of them weakly developed, while others appear somewhat unnecessary because it does not actually add any depth or dimension to the overall story. The supernatural element, for example, appears to be abandoned halfway into the novel (after Jang Mee slips into a coma) as the story increasingly focuses on Sybil's struggle to come to terms with, and accept, herself. The plot enterprise leading towards this objective is primarily effected through "romantic" interludes with two men: Greg, Min's identical twin, and Jae, a wealthy but partially handicapped businessman. This narrative detour completely shifts the tenor of the story, and in my view, robs it of an otherwise promising premise by replacing it with one reminiscent of a coming-of-age tale, which somehow does not really work. I am not saying that such a story does not sit well with gothic conventions, since many gothic stories are actually also coming of age ones. My quibble is more with a lack of balance between the two genres that compels the sacrifice of one in order to initiate and develop the other, resulting in what are otherwise two disparate tales ineffectually trying to work as one. This is especially evident in the fact that Sybil's two "love" interests remain only more or less tangential to the story, and their function seems limited to helping the protagonist realise her feelings for Min and transcend her own secret fears. This explains why I have placed both the words romantic and love in quotation marks: to suggest, without contradicting my earlier point that they are colourful and realistic, that these characters are merely plot devices to move the protagonist forward along her *bildungs*.

Also, while I appreciate and even admire the writer's deftness at intertextually correlating the novel to other literary works and to pop culture to emphasise, analogically, its theme, that they also suffer the same fate of being referenced only to be neglected after a while constitutes another of its glaring limitation. The allusion to the Greek underworld would only be relevant as long as the narrative stays with its supernatural theme, but once the latter becomes sidelined, it is not surprising that the former would be gradually muted as well to be replaced by others more pertinent to its new direction, such as the novel's title, for example, that refers to a 1979 Blondie song about a girl attempting to escape into herself after her boyfriend cheated on her – a scenario that parallels Sybil. But Blondie's "Sunday Girl" is fundamentally an ambiguous song, because it is difficult to decide if the girl's situation is liberating or depressing – which, strangely, also reflects Sybil's circumstance.

Still, *Sunday Girl* is a promising first novel and a testimony to the writer's immense talent and ferocious imagination, and I have no doubt that she has more good things for us on the horizon.

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