‘WE’RE ALL THE SAME NOTHINGNESS’: THE ‘UNHINGED WOMAN’ TROPE IN CONTEMPORARY LITERARY FICTION

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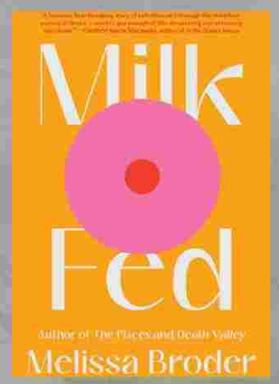
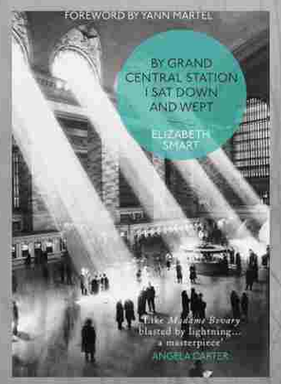
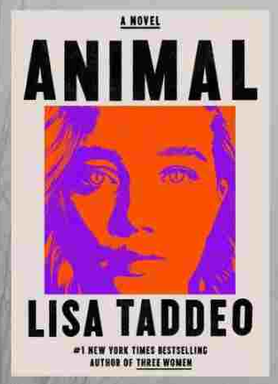
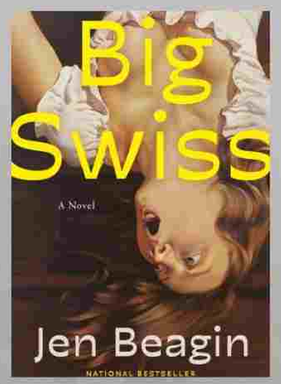
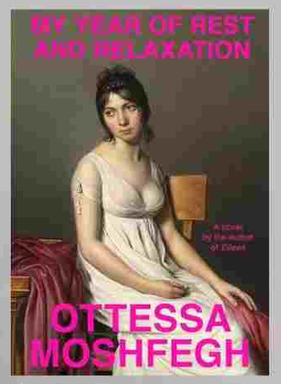
“We're mostly empty space. We're mostly nothing. *Tra-la-la.* And we're all the *same* nothingness.” — *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Ottessa Moshfegh

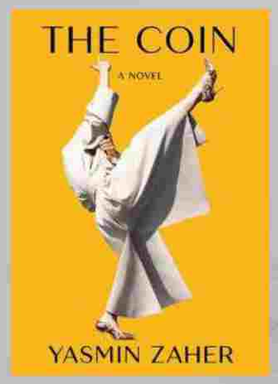


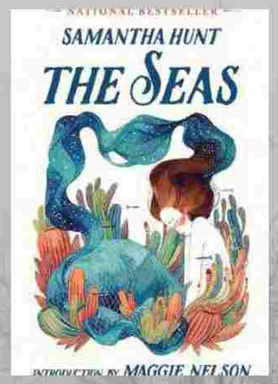


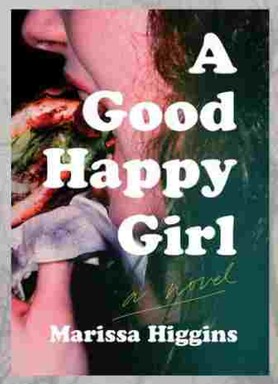












- BOY PARTS BY ELIZA CLARK
- THE GUEST BY EMMA CLINE
- WIDE SARGASSO SEA BY JEAN RHYS
- THE DAYS OF ABANDONMENT BY ELENA FERRANTE
- HOTHEAD PAISAN

01 INTRODUCTION

The ‘unhinged woman trope’ is an emerging trend in literary fiction wherein women are unlikable in some way, whether it be morally complex, self-destructive, ugly, greedy, cruel, or otherwise defy patriarchal expectations. From weird to borderline insane, this trope functions both as a literary form and an acknowledgement of our shared humanity.

THERE ARE EXAMPLES OF THE ‘UNHINGED WOMAN’ IN MOST MEDIUMS.

02 HISTORY

Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's Macbeth (1623), Bertha Mason of Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847), the unnamed narrator of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper (1892), Medusa, etc... The unhinged woman has always existed as long as there have been expectations to resist.

The recent wave of literature that has reclaimed the ‘unhinged’ anti-heroine as a feminist icon asks “whether these characters are really unhinged at all, or just living out our darkest fantasies of empowerment and catharsis” (Nota Bene Prize).

03 TECHNIQUES

In these novels, the form deviates in response to the character's ‘madness,’ such as:

- Unconventional POV (plural, 2nd person, inconsistency)
- Lack of proper punctuation (no commas)
- Monologues
- Meta-ness
- Run-on sentences
- Repetition
- Informal, conversational tone
- Obscenity
- Fragmentation

> “. . . take hold of today, don't regress, don't lose yourself, keep a tight grip. Above all, don't give in to distracted or malicious or angry monologues. Eliminate the exclamation points. ... I had better remember, always put in the commas.” Book of Disappointment (Eileen Kennedy)

04 PURPOSES & IMPLICATIONS

The trope seems to arise from catharsis; many readers and authors acknowledge these women as fragments of themselves, and reading about unhinged women makes them feel less alone.

05 CRITICISM

“I also find it annoying that negative or more shocking characters are always the ones seen as being the most real. Why can’t happiness and success also be viewed as obtainable?” (Milan Hall)

“Characterizing every single woman that shows a negative emotion or makes a bad decision as the unhinged woman ... creates a negative stigma around women’s emotions. Someone shouldn’t be viewed as unhinged because they had a breakdown” (Milan Hall).

WRITER EMMELINE KLEIN
calls this trend “dissociative feminism.”

This trend often focuses on white protagonists who “check out of the real world”. Writer Emmeline Klein says we can see a similar identity presented on social media with those who have “readily adopted to simply give up — to check out and dissociate.” Klein notes “that this form of detachment is a privilege predominantly available to white women, while marginalized women cannot simply ignore their oppression” (Emily Fletcher).

06 MY BOOK “VIRAL”!

I used this research to complete a first draft of my novel “Viral,” which follows an unnamed protagonist who obsessively stalks a series of women in modern-day Port Coquitlam. The story is told in 2nd person (“you”) and is composed of short, fragmented vignettes.

In the drafting stage, I wrote 63k words, edited down to 50k, and am now in the revision/rewriting process.

63%

Find my published work here.

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