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TEXT review

**Men claiming women and women claiming their strength**

*review by Bronwyn Lovell*



Eugen Bacon  
*Claiming T-Mo*  
Meercat Press, Altana GA 2019  
ISBN: 9781946154132  
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\*Content warning: violence against women\*

‘What might that be, to be strong and woman, I wondered.’ (88)

*Claiming T-Mo* is the debut novel from prolific speculative short-story writer Eugen Bacon. It details a mother’s determination to fight for the innate goodness within her son and her quest to release him from the debilitating and destructive grip of toxic masculinity. It is a narrative that spans planets and generations, is richly inventive in its use of language, and demonstrates the breadth and depth of Bacon’s extraordinary imagination.

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T-Mo is one half of the boy Silhouette gives birth to. The other half is Odysseus. T-Mo is the name the mother chooses for the child. Odysseus is the name his father gives him. Being named twice splits the boy's personality in two. T-Mo is good, Odysseus is not. *Claiming T-Mo* tells the stories of the women in T-Mo's life – his mother, wife, daughter, and granddaughters – and the intergenerational trauma of their encounters with Odysseus, the Hyde to T-Mo's Jekyll. However, there is more than one toxic male character in this story.

Silhouette comes from a family home where ten brothers laud over her in their male entitlement: 'Bring me, give me, fetch me, said the kings. Sod off, said the kings' (20). As the only girl, she is betrothed at birth and married by eleven. Silhouette develops coping strategies to deal with the trauma of sexual encounters with her husband:

My examining the bed, the chamber, outlasted his terrible desire. I lay still long after Novic was gone, my fingers still racing along the artisan bedhead that had mutely witnessed my sacrifice to whatever Novic's desire prescribed. (22)

T-Mo/Odysseus is thus the consequence of statutory rape. In such a patriarchy, a woman who gives birth to a male child is prey giving birth to predator.

Novic also exhibits a dangerous unpredictable nature in this narrative. In a jealous rage, sparked merely because another man covets his wife, Novic puts 'a sizzling rod' in Silhouette's eye (66). Silhouette explains that Novic is 'a priest and a demon, one entity' (66). In this way, Odysseus is simply the name given to T-Mo's own demon – a fault in temperament inherited and learnt from his paternal lineage. Silhouette notices the narcissistic effect time with Novic provokes in the boy, who transforms into the obnoxious and cruel Odysseus in his father's company.

The poetics of speculative fiction is such that it deals in literal metaphors (Chu 2010). The bad man Odysseus inside the good man T-Mo acts as an analogy for internal conflict and the darker aspects of the volatile male psyche rising to the surface and manifesting in uncharacteristic behaviour. Salem, T-Mo's wife, first encounters the malicious impulses of Odysseus when her husband tries to rape her in front of their daughter, Myra.

The man Salem knew, thought she knew, was at speed beside her bedside same time as the bottle crashed. She paused, mid-sentence in her reading, as he jerked her arm and the book fell. Her hand was tender on his chest, her look gentle. And she said, "Please, no." Perhaps a cloud of sadness entered the gentle look when he groped her, when he ripped her garment to bare her tit. (79)

The assault stops when Myra screams and her grandfather, Novic, enters the room and takes the crying child away. Soon after this incident, T-Mo abandons his family, leaving Salem lost and distraught. She enters into a relationship with 'the first prick she [sees] ... in the first car that [throws] mud in her face' (113). Like Silhouette before her, Salem endures enormous grief.

Speculative worldbuilding means authors can imagine realities different to our own, modelling non-patriarchal power structures and alternative roles for women. Speculative fiction writer Sarah Gailey has criticized the high instance of sexual violence in genre fiction (Gailey 2016). *Claiming T-Mo* is no exception to this pattern – the story features undeniably distressing subject matter: child marriage, statutory rape, domestic violence, sexual assault, and animal cruelty. However, Bacon’s dynamic wordplay ensures the book maintains linguistic levity despite the heaviness of its themes.

When T-Mo reappears in his daughter Myra’s life when she herself is a mother, it is in the form of Odysseus. Myra is disturbed to observe that her father allows a flirtatious relationship to develop between himself and her young daughters. Still, Myra observes ‘her fondness for someone about whom everything [is] not right’ (233). This is the crux of the novel – women have an incredible capacity to love seriously troubled and troubling men.

*Claiming T-Mo* acts as a critique of patriarchy and an extended meditation on masculinities. It explores the ways women are hurt and haunted by the men they love – as partners, fathers, and sons. It is also testament to the resilience and potentially transformative power of women’s love in the face of patriarchal terror.

#### **Works cited**

Chu, S-Y 2010 *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep? A Science-Fictional Theory of Representation*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA

Gailey, S 2016 ‘Do Better: Sexual Violence in SFF’, *Tor.com* (22 August): <https://www.tor.com/2016/08/22/do-better-sexual-violence-in-sff> (accessed 17 April 2020)

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