

## BOOK REVIEW:

### *A SAFE GIRL TO LOVE*<sup>1</sup>

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Plett, Casey. *A Safe Girl to Love*. Topside Press, 2014.

Casey Plett's *A Safe Girl to Love* stands as a powerful collection of eleven short stories that centres on the lives of young trans women navigating and negotiating love, friendship, identity, and survival. Published in 2014 by Topside Press, the book stands out for its emotional honesty and its portrayal of trans individuals as subjects, not objects to study. Moreover, through the trivial and informal tone maintained throughout the entire narrative piece, Plett is able to position both the characters and the readers into spaces never explored before. The text breaks away from the cis male gaze that has generally characterised other stories about trans people, such as David Ebershoff's *The Danish Girl* (2000) or Patrick McCabe's *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998). Recent scholarship on trans literature has called for narratives that move beyond medicalised or sensationalised representations (Stryker and Currah 1-18), and Plett's collection aligns with this critical shift by centring intimacy, vulnerability, and everyday survival. Moreover, even though this novel is not a recent publication, the issues addressed remain contemporary.

While the stories vary in tone and setting, they share a deep sense of longing for safety, recognition, and connection. Rather than attempting to represent trans experiences as a whole immovable entity, Plett offers a series of glimpses into different lives, each shaped by its own struggles, personal stories, and desires. One of the key elements in these stories is the context which normally limits the range of action and of coping of the protagonists. A further dimension running through the collection is the construction of trans girlhood. Many characters relate to girlhood through interruption, delay, or belated

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recognition since their adolescence is shaped by roles that obscure their emerging identities. In this regard, one of the most striking aspects of the collection resides in the exploration of the tension between visibility and safety. In “Other Women” Sophie, the narrator, grapples with being seen as a trans woman and as a romantic partner. In her pursuit of identity plenitude, there is a moment where she is uncertain whether her date sees her fully as a person or only as an idea, and such tension between being desired and objectified runs throughout the other stories as well. Accordingly, in “Not Bleak”, which stands as one of the deepest emotional stories in the collection, a trans woman reflects on the emotional weight of trying to build relationships while holding onto past trauma. These stories do not offer clear solutions to specific problems, and that is part of the real dimension in which they are located. Plett’s characters are often caught in moments of transition, not just gender-wise, but emotionally, economically, and socially. The writing is at its best when it lingers on those liminal or uncertain spaces, which sometimes evoke the feeling of being non-places (Augé), refusing to become too simplistic, reductionist, or to explain too much.

Another theme that is tackled in the book is the importance and difficulty of the chosen family. Whilst many of the characters are estranged from their biological families or have experienced rejection and solitude, they continue searching for connection, as it is inherent to the human condition. For instance, in stories such as “Portland, Oregon” and “Lizzie & Annie”, friendships and romantic bonds become lifelines where vital debates and insights develop, including transmisogyny. Nonetheless, the longing for meaningful and truthful connections is also embedded into complicated, messy, and painful social relations. Once again, the reader is able to observe how Plett stays away from any idealisation of the queer or trans communities, which she shows as spaces of both care and conflict. The people in these stories make mistakes, hurt each other, and sometimes drift apart, while a deep sense of tenderness and complicity arises underneath the chaos. In a more stylistic sense, Plett’s prose does not draw attention to itself, but it gives centre stage to the text’s emotional weight. The narrators usually speak in a casual and careless way, which turns the moments of either pain or vulnerability into protagonists of the stories. There is a kind of quiet confidence in the way these stories are told. Plett does trust her readers to sit with discomfort, to grasp the subtext and to notice the dilemmas and troubles that are not being explicitly said. Such restraint is part of what gives the collection its emotional power and its contemporary relevance. Henceforth,

these stories do not demand sympathy but they try to raise awareness and invite understanding.

The collection also captures a very specific generational moment. Many of the characters are often broke, living in small apartments, in the outskirts and suburbs of big cities, relying on Craigslist, and oscillating between different low-wage jobs and economic scarcity. This evokes a sort of rootlessness in many of the stories, a sense of being always in motion but rarely settled. Through this depiction of events, *A Safe Girl to Love* is not just about trans identity, but also about the uncertainty and instability that many young people face, particularly those living in the margins whether literally or figuratively. The precarity, whether economic, emotional, or geographical, is grounded in reality and shapes the characters' decisions in subtle ways.

“Twenty Hot Tips to Shopping Success”, “How to Stay Friends”, and “Real Equality (A Manifesto)” share a similar narrative style which stands out through its comic tone. In these three stories, there are critiques of diet culture or the performance of gendered expectations. Nonetheless, the second story, although a little casual in tone, uses a deceptively simple form to show how friendship can be hard to maintain after transitioning. The dialogue between the two women seems natural, even mundane at times, but there is an underlying current of care, fear, and unspoken history between them. Thus, the story captures how difficult it can be to move through transition while maintaining a sense of closeness. Although it is not dramatically constructed, the emotional implications and weight of the unspoken dynamics stay for a while. In other stories such as “How Old Are You Anyway?”, themes of trans identity and the complexities of coming-of-age and belonging continue to emerge. This narrative follows Lisa's story and her deepest thoughts and struggles. The first line of the story, “[t]he weird thing is that Lisa could never remember her age” (38), reflects much more than a simple forgetfulness. According to the solitude and lack of support she experiences, her transition feels fractured and disjointed referring to what may be understood as lost time regarding the years lived in a gender role that did not align with her true identity. The later embodiment of her true self can be understood as a way of rebirth. Furthermore, this represents the scrambling of traditional markers such as age through the reclaiming of her lost girlhood. Lisa's story also addresses some of the fetishes which surround trans identities within the cis heterosexual community, as exemplified by her job as an online sexual worker. Within this collection, Plett ensures to include little hints to the recurrent

(ab)use of drugs, a common activity in these stories, which acts as a palliative remedy for emotional disturbance.

The narrator presents some of the characters as people marked by trauma and by a permanent sensation of being static, stuck between dissociation and the necessity of being taken care of. In some of the stories as in “A Carried Ocean Breeze”, the beach is the main and liminal setting where external violence is suspended and the possibility of imagining a new way of being opens up for the protagonist. This story specifically revolves around public exposition and corporeal intimacy, giving the reader a feeling of lack of plenitude. In contrast to the other stories in the collection, it ends with the present as a survival mode where being alive, or at least stable, is already a form of resistance in a system which seeks to dismantle disruptive identities.

Part of Plett’s brilliance and success is her unframing of trans people within closed boxes subject to scrutiny and constant analysis by readers. Through the informal tone, she is able to inject her social critique in a subtle manner. The book’s stark, literal portrayal of the cruelty trans people and young female subjects endure may at times feel unbearable, yet its sheer narrative grip makes it impossible to look away. Through the protagonists, grappling with the insecurities typical of their age, the author is able to raise the question as to how much the characters risk to be accepted and loved and how often they lose themselves in the process. *A Safe Girl to Love* contributes to trans literary studies by foregrounding trans girlhood as an affective and precarious experience, expanding critical discussions of girlhood beyond cisnormative frameworks. Future research could extend this framework to transnational and non-Western experiences of trans girlhoods and structural precarity.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

ALICIA MARTÍNEZ-MARTÍN is a PhD Candidate in Comparative Literature and Literary Studies at the University of the Basque Country (EHU). Her doctoral research examines coping strategies, vulnerability, and epistemic agency in speculative fiction by female authors from North America (the United States and Canada). She is currently collaborating with the Medical Humanities Project at the University of Lisbon, where her research engages with ethics of care and narrative approaches to trauma, violence against women, and social vulnerability. Alongside her scholarly work, she explores creative writing as a critical and artistic practice that examines memory, identity, and embodiment. Her work engages with the intersections between literary research and artistic creation.

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