

MYSTERIOUS WOMEN

神秘女子

*Two books and a pile of anonymous letters bring together the lives of three unknown women in another delicate masterpiece of psychological fiction by the architect of words, Roan Ching-Yueh. **Mysterious Women** takes the term “narrative love triangle” to a whole new level, weaving inner and outer voices together with marvelous dexterity.*

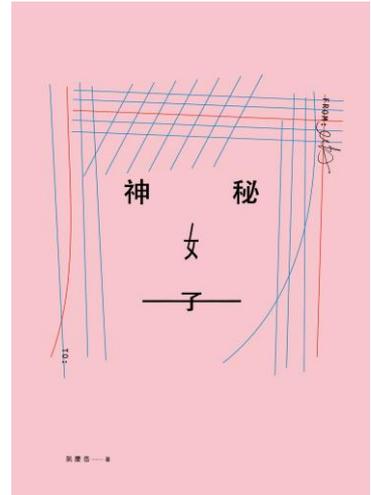
One day, a woman receives two heavy manuscripts in the mail, the first marked “Diary,” and the second, “Novel.” Though she doesn’t recognize the sender, she opens both out of curiosity. In doing so, she falls from one world into another, and then another.

The “Diary,” which itself reads like a novel, appears to be that of a middle-aged male novelist. Recently divorced, his literary prowess seems starkly at odds with his fragile mental state: a recent divorce has spurred a mid-life crisis, amidst which he has decided to write a novel about love and faith. Yet as he tries to think through his new project, his life is interrupted by a daily series of letters from an anonymous female reader, which insert a new voice into his already chaotic mind. The “Novel,” meanwhile, tells the story of a young woman’s journey through privation as a child into emotional maturity, love, and sexual desire: raised by her grandmother, the female protagonist marries young, has an affair that produces a daughter, then shuts herself off from both husband and lover in an attempt to foster a persistent and pure love for her baby.

Roan Ching-Yueh once again gives free rein to his talent for psychological description in this multivalent narrative trip through mind and spirit. Enchanting language turns the reader from viewpoint to viewpoint, and from life to life with consummate ease, as Roan’s characters fight and converse with themselves and each other.

Roan Ching-Yueh 阮慶岳

Roan Ching-Yueh is a master of many trades. An acclaimed architect



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as well as a writer, Roan was the curator of the Taiwanese pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2006. He's written many books, including novels, essay collections, and monographs on architecture. His novel *Victory Song* won the 2004 Taipei Literary Award, *Lin Xiuzi And Her Family* was long-listed for the 2009 Man Asian Literary Prize, and his 2016 novel *Hometown at Dusk* was named a Top Ten Chinese Novel of the Year by *Asia Weekly*.

MYSTERIOUS WOMEN

By Roan Ching-Yueh

Translated by Zac Haluza

June 22, 2016

When I finally set pen to paper and wrote down the first hundred words, it felt like chipping at a boulder with an axe. Initially, the idea motivating me to write this novel was itself so unclear, it felt like an attempt to carve my own miserable countenance into a mountain. A nameless thought had steadily rose in my head after the publication of my last book, growing more irresistible with every passing day, and this was most likely the reason why I was suddenly inching along. It was like a sentence that burned to be spoken, a voice unclear and distinct all at once, a result wrapped in a nightmare!

Yet worry and hesitation set in once I actually committed to the work. Establishing the right tone of voice proved difficult, and deciding how to structure the book's plot and purpose even more so. It felt trying to prepare the proper set of luggage for a long journey, but constantly failing. I was also aware that various unknown difficulties awaited me. The disheartening notions began appearing in my brain, one after another, telling me that I would inevitably forget something. It filled me with instability and hidden fears.

Regardless, I have already begun. I have so many questions, but I am not yet completely sure how to answer them. However, one must inevitably turn to the first page, just as one must take their first step. Likewise, I have to understand that now I have embarked on this road, I must walk it to the end. Even though my head was a storm of confusion, with only that indistinct voice still calling to me, and a flickering light dimly guiding me from a distance, everything else was silence and darkness.

Yet still I tell myself, Keep moving! Just keep moving! I continue forward like a ship that is too far out to return to shore. In fact, I should probably congratulate myself on the sole basis of my seemingly ignorant persistence and my obstinacy, which is all but free of regret!

Come to think of it, I only wanted to write this book in order to express a clear and simple message: essentially the admiration of sticking to one's convictions. It was a grand ode to the individual's ability to persist in a task and complete it without paying any mind to other people's expectations.

However, I also immediately sensed that this objective of mine, which seemed so pure and simple, was not easily found in reality. You see, if one lacks the ability to control their conviction, or tolerate the complex and conflicting realities behind it – even if the conviction be a simple one – its simplicity will ultimately devolve into monotony and blandness. It will not bloom into ordinary – yet beautiful – purity, nor into the sort of simplicity and beauty that we so often yearn for.

Also, this motivation, with its plain and direct intentions, was also a private desire to see whether I could summon the kinds of words that attach themselves to simple, unsophisticated thoughts – that is, the language of muddled, vague, and enthusiastic emotions. Those mysterious bits of information transmitted from distant places. Those things that always remain hidden. Would they finally decide to open their mouths and speak because of the simplicity and purity of this book's intentions and its characters?

I also constantly reminded myself that I needed to exercise restraint and timely self-control to preserve the clarity and simplicity of my train of thought, as well as the tranquility and soundness of my mind and body. Otherwise, my incessant outpouring of words might very well become turbid, like a stream after a heavy rain – unable to converse with the stream bed, instead washed away in an instant to become indistinguishable particles in a vast sea. My words would remain obscure to readers, like a fossilized silkworm cocoon, frozen in its nascent state for all eternity.

Actually, for one to sufficiently temper one's own tolerance or capacity for control, one must first grasp the nature of a peaceful state of mind. In particular, one must also learn to prevent the interference of any and all outside influence, and to forcibly maintain a healthy mental state. All of this is necessary for a reason: in my novel, I wish to explore the simple and initial possibilities of the id. In that moment, everything is pre-arranged. Yet unlimited possibilities still exist; when nature obeys neither life nor death, any deliberate human behavior or involvement is entirely unnecessary, superfluous, and useless.

This original truth is constantly waiting for someone to capture and narrate it. Persisting in maintaining this belief is also a necessary attitude for abandoning the reality of the moment. Additionally, when one continuously makes mistakes without regret, when one puts oneself into a state of eternal uncertainty, when one sees the fire still burning inside and guides its light and warmth – generated by thought – one has the opportunity to let it flow out in poetic tones.

To get to the point, what I really want to write about may simply be love – just that simple, direct thing. One could say that it is something that everyone understands. Some may ask why I choose not to write about a more serious or noble topic, such as a call for revolution or justice. To me, love and revolution are intrinsically the same thing. Both contain the suffering and damage all humans endure, as well as an incompleteness that can never truly be overcome. Writing a love story is somewhat simpler. One need only experience suffering and disillusionment alongside the protagonist, make oneself truly feel that same heartrending pain. Stories about revolution are different. One can easily turn one's own suffering and someone else's into two separate things, unintentionally approaching someone else's blood-soaked life story as a theory, a topic that has nothing to do with oneself. I therefore think that completing a truly faithful treatment of this topic would be more difficult and dangerous.

Yet even if I were to write a love story, I would still need to feel the same emotions as the central character. This still would not be easy to accomplish. For example, take the strange letter that my publisher forwarded to me again today. After patiently reading it, I walked to my balcony and set it aflame with my lighter, then smoked a cigarette as I watched it disintegrate into black ash. While its shape was still vaguely distinguishable, its essence had already vanished from existence. At the same time, I began to wonder how a girl so foolish could still

exist today – someone completely absorbed in her own imaginary world, yet still so utterly self-convinced, and with such overwhelming willpower.

When I first received these letters, the emotions and resentment inside them flustered me. I even began to suspect that I had once known such a girl, or that I had once carelessly hurt the feelings of an acquaintance. I read every letter that came from the publisher, without exception. After opening the light pink envelope, I read those clumsy thin-lined characters written in black gel-ink pen. Even the heavy artificial fragrance drifting off the paper became an accepted part of my daily routine. Stylistically, every letter was essentially the same, except that each would begin with a new and strangely intimate greeting, as if we were close lovers. The signature consisted of an equally bizarre English name; the writer left no actual name or return address.

At first I attempted to treat these things as uneventful, everyday occurrences, as though these anonymous letters were things that I could nonchalantly brush aside. However, I soon discovered that this woman was so writing so punctually that I could predict when the next one would come with startling accuracy. Now concerned, I began sending each subsequent letter to my lawyer and a psychologist friend. They immediately told me with great certainty that these letters were most likely the acts of woman suffering from delusions. It was very probable that this individual was a fan of my books, and that she had simply selected me as the object upon which to focus her daily fantasies.

“Judging from what she’s written to you so far, she has nothing but boundless admiration and praise for you. She poses no threat to you, either. So there’s no need to take legal action at the moment, nor would we have sufficient grounds to do so. Unless she clearly hints at the possibility of threatening behavior, or makes any harmful verbal attacks, you have no choice but to passively observe and take appropriate measures to protect yourself,” my lawyer told me.

“I honestly don’t see any immediate threat, or a need for legal countermeasures. However, I recommend that you keep your guard up. Individuals suffering from delusional disorder will develop all kinds of fictions to superimpose over reality, and they will act upon them. So while you cannot reply or proactively respond, you should still pay attention to what she writes, and particularly to any demonstration of intense changes in mood. This will help you prepare for whatever may happen next,” my psychologist friend recommended.

I’ll admit that reading this woman’s letters made me queasy, like something disgusting had been shoved down my throat. Those fulsome praises and idyllic longings for a life together in the future failed to stir any sympathetic feelings inside me. Yet as I continued reading, taking note of her occasional descriptions of her own life, and her everyday tone of voice, I began to feel a sense of familiarity toward this stranger. My curiosity grew, and I even began to feel concern toward the details of her personal life that she included in these letters.

Like a fish that had unwittingly taken the bait, I allowed her to gradually penetrate the defenses of my world – a world that was originally shielded, protected, and whole – through the inconsequential details of her daily life. After all, my initial fear was that her letters might represent some sort of tangible or intangible harm to me, either physically or in terms of my daily life. However, as time went on, I found that my anxiety, which gradually intensified, sprung from my concern for whether she would interfere with my daily routine, or present an obstacle to my writing as I tried to control my emotions and the development of my thoughts.

For instance, the novel I began writing only today actually serves as a personal reminder of the importance of keeping my life pure and simple, as only then can I probe into the soul's deeper and more hidden regions. If I cannot achieve this, I will never be able to express what I wish to in my writing: the purity of those individuals who dedicate themselves to a belief. It was the same chilling feeling that struck me when I watched the letter, now reduced to ashes, scatter in the wind. I instantly realized that this piece of paper, destined to become ash, contained a prophecy of defeat. Could this ultimately hint at the ending of her life, or of my own creative efforts? Would the writing of this novel actually become a metaphor for the battle between the two of us? Could someone have sent her to obstruct or temper me? Was her purpose simply to test me? To see whether I had enough strength to complete my own objective? And were we, within each other's flickering presence, setting up for a confrontation over the proper answers to fate – and doing it through the developing body of my novel, which neither of us could predict?

If it were impossible to stop her from writing letter after letter, imposing on me these cloaked impediments, and my own life and creativity suffered as a result, would I not then unwittingly become a slave to her will? And wouldn't my final goals ultimately amount to nothing more than pointless writing, and scatter like the ashes of her letters? Since I could not confront her, how could I use the power that remained under my control – the focusing my effort on this novel, as I could still control the direction in which it developed – to create a real-life barrier between myself and this delusional individual? How could I ward off her maliciously desire to penetrate and interfere with my own means of living with her constant letters, while simultaneously rejecting her attempts to lure me into a dangerous abyss? Perhaps this is exactly why I need to be on my guard!

Yet I am honestly not sure why I decided to begin this novel. It was as if I had already sensed the coming of an inevitable event, like witnessing torrents of water rush down a nearby mountain on their way to take my life, and I wished to use the sole thing that I had mastered to leave behind some evidence of my former existence. However, is it not also possible that I have simply refused to resign myself to this fate and its inevitability, and that I desire to use the power and authority that my creativity had bestowed upon me to attempt to challenge this rushing torrent's control, as well as its direction?

Myself, the unknown reader, and the woman whom I have only just begun to create in my nascent story are all equally unaware of who we actually are, and we are just as unaware of what tomorrow might bring. There are no hints, promises, or chances for regret. This novel must be a fair world. For this reason, I absolutely will not allow it merely to depict and repeat things that have already occurred in the real world. To the contrary, I hope that it will be able to spread its wings and develop freely, flitting through space and through memories however it wishes. Ultimately it will become another true, imaginary world to be discovered.

Perhaps it is more accurate to say that I am working on a challenging self-portrait rather than writing a novel. You see, this seemingly futile and blindly undertaken endeavor is simply a tenacious act carried out from a desperate position to add a few more brush-strokes before my life ends, to retrace the outline of that life that once existed, or uncover some true image of myself from deep within my own memories. To put it this way seems too hollow and futile, and this is not at all my original intention. Perhaps I am thinking and acting in this fashion as a

means to discover some truths that I still do not know, and reclaim some means of living that I have lost!

I have two reasons for why I am suddenly writing down these trivialities tonight. The first is the excitement and anxiety that comes with starting a novel; the other is that receipt of another letter from this anonymous woman has suddenly thrown all of my thoughts into disorder. Even now, it is hard for me to understand why I've suddenly linked my own writing, originally a purely internal act, to this anonymous woman's rude conduct. The very fact that these two things appear so connected is in itself rather sudden and odd. I think I associate them now because a considerable amount of time has passed since she last sent me a letter. Did she make a snap decision to stop sending me letters on a rigid schedule because she had already considered breaking contact with me? Or did something unexpected happen, something in her private life that I am unaware of, causing her to suddenly postpone her writing, and thereby stimulate my unease?

But will I actually continue to wait eagerly for her letters? Was my motivation for starting the book no more than the anxiety that arose after I failed to hear from her for a while? This logic is impossible. It couldn't have happened thus. Yet it was this very fact that made me think hard about an article I had perused several days earlier. The article stated that Dostoevsky had written the following to a friend soon before his death: "The road to healing and the road to escape are actually the same path. Such is art, and such is creative work."

In that case, do her continued letters and my writing of my novel simply illustrate that both of us have some kind of unmentionable illness? Could it be a subtle manifestation of our true and urgent need to be cured, or to escape? And why should the whole matter of these letters make me so resistant and uneasy? Am I so set on healing others, or on telling everyone else their own means of escape while I attempt to live in complacency and glory that I forget that I myself am the one suffering from a disorder?

I'm exhausted. That's all for today.

Good night! Good night!

July 5, 2016

Things have come to a halt. I haven't even had the strength to read anything else.

I think there are two reasons. The first is that I still cannot find an appropriate basis in reality for this character that I have just brought to life – that is, a sense of realism that will allow the world to acknowledge her. To accept her. Her clothing or her history, for instance, or her voice. The other reason is that I am still unable to truly distill her special brand of purity (or to put it another way, the evil opposite that will prove by contrast that she is truly pure).

Maybe this also means that I have still not created that kind of distinguishing metaphysical characteristic that could bring her into being without forcing her to adhere to reality. This is the very kind of voice that I truly wish to convey. Perhaps because of her own insulated, stubborn, and shameless attitude, she elicits misunderstandings from everyone else, to the point where they wish her dead. Yet some action, or absolute devotion on her part to a

certain belief allows her to reveal fully her personal intentions, as well as a hidden internal force that leaves the others with no choice but to respect her. To believe in her.

The reason behind my writer's block may also very well actually be due to my lack of belief in her. I do not really believe in the existence of her strength or its power. Or is it because I still lack respect for her purity? And thus do not dare to have her commit evil and truly undergo a process of tempering and refinement? Although I can sense her presence, I still can't feel her breath and heartbeat. Just as before, the relationship we share is still too hollow and dim. The flesh and blood necessary for existence still have no way of growing on her. She can only appear as a silhouette, constantly evading the gaze of the world like a grey cloud that does not know what shape to take.

Or is she intentionally choosing to evade me because she has not yet prepared herself and does not wish to confront me? Perhaps I'm being overly suspicious. In truth, every story and character waits for us fully formed. It is not unlike when a beautiful song begins to sound over the dance floor: while seemingly empty, the floor has already predicted that you and I shall summon some mysterious spirit, half-hidden in the shadow, and begin our inevitable dialogue of dance. Indeed, perhaps it is not the arrangement of stories and characters that has not prepared, but rather I myself, anxiously wishing to summon them. Perhaps they hesitate to show themselves because I lack the correct attitude and aura. Moreover, my blatant aggressiveness, my hubris, and even my methods of inference, which lean on rational logic and a single perspective, all conspire to prevent her from consenting to dance with me.