



3-28-2019

This Is How You Lose Me

Anna Cincotta
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/surge>

 Part of the [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Cincotta, Anna, "This Is How You Lose Me" (2019). *SURGE*. 343.
<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/surge/343>

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/surge/343>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

This Is How You Lose Me

Abstract

I liked the intimate setting of the class at first. The silence before the professor walked in. The cramped room. It always smelled like citrus cleaning products. Some hair gel mixed in there, too.

There was peanut butter stuck on the roof of my mouth — from my sandwich at lunch — when he walked in that day, throwing a stack of Junot Díaz’s short story, “*Alma*,” onto the center of the shared table.

I liked Junot Díaz’s writing. Loved it, actually. The way he captures pain and molds stories by weaving together the language of diary entries and love letters and suicide notes. The way he uses magic and grit and blood. Darkness and love simultaneously. His work is tragically beautiful.

At least, that’s what I think. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Alma, Bias, Carmen Maria Machado, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Junot Diaz, Monica Byrne, power dynamics, prejudice, professor bias, Sexual Harassment, silencing, This is How You Lose Her, Zinzi Clemmons

Disciplines

Civic and Community Engagement

Comments

Surge is a student blog at Gettysburg College where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

THIS IS HOW YOU LOSE ME

March 28, 2019

I liked the intimate setting of the class at first. The silence before the professor walked in. The cramped room. It always smelled like citrus cleaning products. Some hair gel mixed in there, too.

There was peanut butter stuck on the roof of my mouth — from my sandwich at lunch — when he walked in that day, throwing a stack of Junot Díaz's short story, "Alma," onto the center of the shared table.

I liked Junot Díaz's writing. Loved it, actually. The way he captures pain and molds stories by weaving together the language of diary entries and love letters and suicide notes. The way he uses magic and grit and blood. Darkness and love simultaneously. His work is tragically beautiful.

At least, that's what I think.

Especially that New Yorker article he wrote about his intimate relationship with childhood trauma, revealing himself as a survivor of sexual abuse. My favorite passage: "The kid before—hard to remember. Trauma is a time traveller, an ouroboros that reaches back and devours everything that came before. Only fragments remain."

But there are other quotes from that article. Quotes like this one: "Classic trauma psychology: approach and retreat, approach and retreat. And hurting other people in the process."

Authors Carmen Maria Machado, Monica Byrne, and Zinzi Clemmons came forward following the publication of this New Yorker piece. Byrne mentions this quote, specifically.

"...hurting other people in the process."

I know that *I've* thought about this quote a lot. Or, I should say, struggled with it. *Didn't anyone look into it? Think a little more critically about it?*

During a Q&A for his book tour, Machado asked Díaz a question surrounding his "protagonist's unhealthy, pathological relationship with women" in *This Is How You Lose Her*. He responded viscerally, attacking

her intellect and ability to think critically about the text for twenty minutes. This outburst happened in public.

Byrne was invited to a dinner where she ended up sitting next to Díaz. When she brought up the topic of gender bias in publishing, he reacted by screaming “rape” in her face. After this outburst, he spoke only to the other men seated at the table, and outwardly dismissed her comments.

Clemmons, while attending Columbia University as a graduate student, was cornered and forcibly kissed by Díaz after inviting him to speak at a workshop highlighting issues of representation in literature.

These women can’t — and *shouldn’t* — be ignored. We need to contextualize Díaz’s writing. Wrestle with the relationship between authors and their works. Remember that the pain he writes about so eloquently may be, ironically, capturing the feelings of the women suffering from his sexual misconduct. The violation that *he* alone is responsible for. This needs to be talked about. Challenged, even.

If I’m being completely honest, I thought that was where my professor wanted us to go with our class discussion when he threw those copies of “Alma” onto the table. It would’ve led to some pretty cool analysis. Could’ve provided an opportunity to crack open that crusty shell of misogyny and give a little sunlight to the mildewed grievances of these women. Of *all* women.

At least, I hoped the Díaz short story in front of me would allow for that conversation in class.

But maybe I was wrong. Maybe that wasn’t where the discussion was going.

The guy sitting across from me sips causally on an iced coffee, checking his phone under the desk. Everyone knows his name. He goes for it whenever he raises his hand. Confidently. Even when he’s wrong, he sounds right.

I could never pull that off.

Before I speak in class I go over my points obsessively, with this circular reasoning, before I muster up the courage to raise my hand. I’m quieter than I am in other parts of my life. Less inclined to go for something bold. Always reading the room.

Checking myself. *Constantly*.

After we finished reading, my professor asked us to comment. He left the question open, providing us with what I would later come to recognize as an *illusion* of control and power over the class. Nobody’s hand went up. I wanted to say something.

I mean, the last sentence of the short story felt like it was all over me:

“This is how you lose her.”

Made me think of his book, *This Is How You Lose Her*. Which made me think about those women. If you give a mouse a cookie, I guess.

I *needed* to say something.

After a few seconds, I looked around and raised my hand. I was hesitant at first. Always am. But then I took a deep breath and started speaking.

“I really like Díaz’s writing...his voice. But it’s hard for me to reconcile these feelings with the allegations against him. With the women who’ve recently come forward. Especially considering the content of some of his more popular pieces. How do we separate an author from—

“Stop.”

And I did.

I mean, he was my professor.

“We don’t talk about those things in this space. We talk about writing. All these allegations you’re bringing up? They’re irrelevant to this class.”

I looked down at the table. My throat tightened as I tried to clear it; the words caught back there like saltines and dust. I closed my mouth and bit down hard on my tongue — the metallic taste flooding my mouth. Silencing me.

Well, silencing me *further*.

I felt exposed. The class was silent. My cheeks were hot. I could still taste that peanut butter on the roof of my mouth, reminding me of being scolded by a teacher as a little girl.

I thought we were supposed to be thinking about these things. The things that are usually left unsaid.

The things quietly growing mold in the corner.

And that illusion I mentioned earlier? The space I’d built up in my head, where the professor was allowing his students to have control over the discussion? I fell for it. I mean, it felt like college to me. That’s what I wanted. What I thought I was getting.

Instead?

Broken glass. Beyond broken, I should say. A dumpster fire wreaking of lies and oversimplification and falsehoods.

But I felt like my professor’s outburst was my fault, so I backpedaled. Didn’t say anything else in class that day. Tried to get my hands to stop sweating.

I waited until everyone had left, and approached the professor when the room was finally quiet. My cheeks were still hot. Hands still drenched.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to disrupt your class."

The apology poured out like a shame-filled spoonful of cherry cough syrup — thick and sweet and artificial. Nauseatingly calculated. Just saccharine enough to clear my name for the remainder of the semester. A self-preserving knife in my own gut.

I mean, again. He was my professor. I *had* to apologize.

And that's what I do.

We do.

Right?

I felt sick as the words fell out, realizing that even my apology had taken a spin on that stupid merry-go-round in my mind. Edited to avoid grammatical mistakes and irrelevancy. Revised to show just enough weakness and submission to appease the man in front of me.

Why am I doing this to myself?

The shame ripped into me violently. Left some bruises. Still, I waited for his response and focused on keeping my composure.

He finally raised his eyebrows and offered a response.

"All of these accusations, they remind me of the McCarthy Era. Are you familiar?"

I nodded, looking at my feet.

"Horrible time for America," he said.

With that he walked out of the room, flicking off the lights mindlessly before I could choke out a single word.

I had so much to say in response to this. Equating the Red Scare with allegations of sexual misconduct? Groundless. I wanted to wash my face and drink a glass of water and scream.

I went to the library instead.

But I still see that professor sometimes, and can't help but think about the taste of that peanut butter and the smell of those citrus cleaning products and the way he reduced me to apologizing for something I promised myself I never would.

MIT cleared Díaz of any sexual misconduct allegations. My professor still walks across campus and into that cramped classroom every day.

And me?

I still think too much before I speak in class.

Anna Cincotta '21
Contributing Writer