

Women's Prize for Fiction 2021



2021 SHORTLIST

NO ONE IS TALKING ABOUT THIS by PATRICIA LOCKWOOD

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Patricia Lockwood was born in a trailer in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and raised in all the worst cities of the Midwest. She is the author of two poetry collections, *Balloon Pop* and *Outlaw Black* and *Motherland Fatherland Homelandsexuals*, and the memoir *Priestdaddy*. *No One Is Talking About This* is her first novel. Lockwood's writing has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, the *New Republic* and the *London Review of Books*, where she is a contributing editor. She lives in Savannah, Georgia.

PLOT SUMMARY

A woman known for her viral social media posts travels the world speaking to her adoring fans, her entire existence overwhelmed by the internet – or what she terms 'the portal'. Are we in hell? the people of the portal ask themselves. Are we all just going to keep doing this until we die?

Suddenly, two texts from her mother pierce the fray: 'Something has gone wrong' and 'How soon can you get here?' As real life and its stakes collide with the increasing absurdity of the portal, the woman confronts a world that seems to contain both an abundance of proof that there is goodness, empathy and justice in the universe, and a deluge of evidence to the contrary.

Irreverent and sincere, poignant and delightfully profane, *No One Is Talking About This* is at once a love letter to the infinite scroll and a meditation on love, language and human connection from one of the most original voices of our time.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

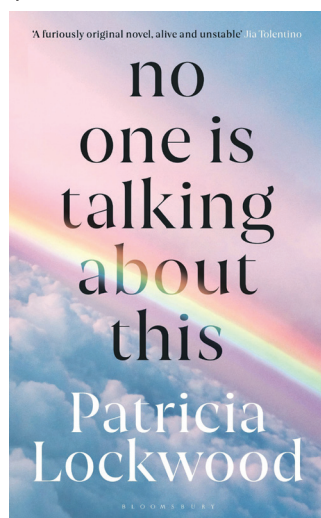
No One Is Talking About This depicts a social media 'portal' similar to Twitter in which users' behaviour has, in many ways, become dehumanised – photoshopping frozen peas into pictures of historical atrocities, Paris Hilton's sex tape being dedicated to the memory of 9/11, a man acclaimed for posting pictures of his testicles on the internet. The narrator of the book has, herself, become internationally famous for an absurd tweet that said *Can a dog be twins?*

Lockwood chronicles the narcissistic absurdism of the social media experience with incredible accuracy and expertise, both structuring her book as a stream of consciousness 'scroll' without conventional chapters, and in terms of the fractured, intermittent nature of the entries that seem to follow no particular order, despite still giving us the context of the narrator's life and her interaction within the portal.

We learn about Lockwood's character's 'real' life with her husband and her work, speaking at various conferences about the internet and the portal, but it's interspersed with the nameless character's ruminations on the new fashionable way to laugh and whether it's okay

to read online think pieces about Italians putting chicken in pasta. Everything is as important as everything else, and the character considers her life to be more online than not.

Yet, the physical reality of her sister's pregnancy also becomes part of Lockwood's character's experience, and when the baby is diagnosed with a rare genetic defect, it becomes harder to maintain the ironic hilarity at terrible things demanded by the portal. Bodies, inevitably, have to be considered, and the character and her family find a poignancy and deeper meaning in reality – which is both horrifying and redeeming – outside the portal.



DISCUSSION POINTS

“Modern womanhood was more about rubbing snail mucus on your face than she thought it would be. But it had always been something, hadn’t it? Taking drops of arsenic. Winding bandages around the feet. Polishing your teeth with lead. It was so easy to believe that you freely chose the paints, polishes and waist-trainers of your own time, while looking back with tremendous pity to women of the past in their whalebones; that you took the longest strides your body was capable of, while women of the past limped forward on broken arches.”
(p.86)

Here, Lockwood’s unnamed character talks about the historically varied beauty standard coupled with the nonetheless enduring pressure on women to adjust their bodies and appearances to fit social norms. How does social media affect ideas of modern womanhood, beauty and the body? Is social media helpful to feminism, in terms of its ability to connect people, share experiences (#MeToo, for instance) and organise, or is it detrimental to women’s mental health because of possible exposure to online bullying, fat shaming, misogyny and beauty advertising? Or both?

How is womanhood defined in *No One Is Talking About This*? How does Lockwood’s point of view character interact with ideas surrounding womanhood, in the portal and outside it?

QUESTIONS

On page 94, the main point of view character considers the difficulty in writing about social media. Has Patricia Lockwood succeeded in capturing the online experience?

Why do you think Lockwood hasn’t given the main character a name? Should she have?

Did you like the style and language of *No One Is Talking About This*? Why, or why not?

How is the baby depicted? How did you feel about the way the baby’s death is written?

NEXT STEPS

Copy half an hour’s worth of text from one of your social media feeds into a document or copy the text into a notebook, then read it aloud. How does it sound? Are there any repeating themes, a common consensus about something, certain language, slang or phrases it uses? Do some voices speak more than others?

Now look at the text and see if you can make something of it, perhaps a poem or the inspiration for a short story. If it’s a poem, see if you can use the text you have without adding anything else – mix it up if necessary. Alternatively, use a phrase or a topic mentioned as the inspiration for a short story.



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“ A BOOK THAT DOES ITS OWN THING. IT TAKES RISKS WHILE MAINTAINING WARMTH, BEING VERY MOVING AND PROFOUNDLY INSIGHTFUL INTO HUMAN NATURE. ”
NESRINE MALIK
2021 JUDGE

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

PRIESTDADDY: A MEMOIR by PATRICIA LOCKWOOD
FAKE ACCOUNTS by LAUREN OYLER