

The Plot of Lies

By

Caragh O'Brien

WHY I LIKE IT: *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...* At the heart of Caragh O'Brien's "The Plot of Lies," lies a range of uncertainties.

What we know is that we have a narrator who is creating a story for us – inherently, they may as well be writing to themselves and the words on the page will never see the light of day – but a story that is continually full of digression, rearrangement, and shifting moods.

In this case, the narrator isn't necessarily a liar. The plot being lies belies the actual plot – that there isn't necessary one. This is a story about someone writing a story and the metaphorical process by which writing is done.

You want to write a story about a girl, but what kind of girl?

A heroine – a Joan of Arc-esque character?

Does she ride a horse?

Does she ride a horse in space?

Maybe it's not a horse, maybe it's a mechanical dinosaur and it's a sci-fi set in the future but a stone age future.

Maybe it's a young girl in school well above her intelligence level in subjective understanding, but all she wants to do is write a story and play with her reading audience.

Maybe she's 50 ft. tall in world where everyone is 50 ft. tall.

Is there a horse that is 50 ft. tall as well?

A dinosaur?

What if she's an alien to our planet and wreaks havoc, unintentionally, like a giant, King Kong, woman across the landscape until we have to take her down?

It's a breadcrumb trail that could never end, and half of that list isn't even in the story.

O'Brien, here, plays with the multiple layers by which a writer can imbue the process of writing, and, just when you think you've figured out another, the narrator goes I bet I know what you are thinking and adds another.

"The Plot of Lies," is just as entertaining as it is literary because the imagination of the narrator is as wild and creative as we want it to be and, in that sense, reflects all of the rich, quirky depths one can reach with metafiction.

Have fun.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (*for the love of language...*)

And so she lets herself sink inward and linger and poke around gently. She is there, this girl in the next novel. She is watching or lurking in a shadowy space with a veil over her head that could vanish if need be. Come forward we tell her in italics. Let us see you. But it's hard for her to emerge because even revealing her clothing will tell us much about her, and that sets deeper imagining wheels churning because we can't know what she wears until we know where she lives, what fabrics are available, what style of clothing exists there for girls of this age, practically women, actually women, but young women. We don't know what her race is, either, what color her dreams. We know she is far from the chocolate milk of chapter one, but that is all.

The Plot of Lies

Maybe this is the novel. Maybe I just started it. Maybe I'm the girl and this is the day. It's either the most brilliant or moronic idea I've ever had. I will never show this to anyone. That already sounds like a promise I'm doomed to fail. Already I can picture my little ambitious, hopeful self showing it to a teacher I don't quite trust, or having it stolen by The Guy, whose name I don't know yet, or worse The Rival, who I would just as soon not create at all because nothing is more tiresome than the snotty long-haired girl who flips said hair over her shoulder as she sneers, overdue for comeuppance.

Naturally, I've gone back to reread my thirty-two words of progress so far. Lame, but whatever. We will not go back to revise. Let's make that one promise to ourselves, now that we're inexplicably plural. Maybe we shouldn't go back and reread, either.

So now we're making up rules? All what twelve of us?

No revising.

No rereading. Fat chance on that one.

The thing about writing a novel one truly wants to write, is one doesn't exactly know where it might take one. How quickly it can snarl down to nothing when the only conflict is that the character doesn't know how she starts.

I'm in school, of course. I'd like to say I'm in a creative writing class doing something productive, but instead I'm in

Nice blank there. I don't know what class I'm in, mainly because I haven't had lunch yet and I'm distracted by my hunger and the existence of the kitchen in the other room. Plus, this is the oddest novel I've written so far. Sometimes typing does interesting things wrath keeping.

Chapter Two

Lord, yes, let it be Chapter Two by now.

If I start at the beginning as people like Dickens characters frequently do, then I should begin in your grade, whatever your grade is, because people like reading books about characters in their own grades and let's face it, there are never enough books about kids in our grade. So my story begins in our grade, at lunch in the cafeteria, because I'm still hungry.

It's my first day here, and my friendly ambassador has abandoned me, and I'm facing a new cafeteria all alone. I manage my way through the line because that's an obvious thing to do, and I have a (repulsive) turkey sandwich with American cheese and mayo, and a small thing of applesauce with a metallic cover which I may well lick later, and carrot sticks in a disconcertingly tepid plastic bag. I reach in for a carton of chocolate milk because no matter what bad thing is about to go down, I'm going to have something sweet to drink, and when I check the expiration date as my mother taught me to do, the girl next to me says

"One hundred and ten."

I glance up at her.

She is going to be my best friend or my worst enemy, and though I'm hoping very strongly for the former, my evil writer heart already knows she'll be trouble because why write a scene unless it has a problem in it? Therefore, I take careful note of her appearance because she's going to matter.

She's blue-skinned and dark-haired, with wide, perceptive black eyes and a cute, bracelet-style watch. She has a gold necklace with a C on it, and gold earrings, too, which don't impress me so much by their gold but by their evidence that she is a put-together person, and I am not.

I am not a put-together person, and this vital discovery distracts me long enough that it takes me a sec to notice how I slipped that blue skin in there. Have we entered a sci-fi novel? Where else would a character so confidently appear in blue skin? Possibilities are now exploding. This could be the cafeteria of a spaceship school, not a normal one on Earth. Part of us very much wants to embrace this idea. Part of us strongly believes we should eat lunch before we go any further.

Incidentally, since when did I get a prejudice against characters who have necklaces with their initials on them? From whence my instinct to call them tacky? This I do not know. Sadly, I am discovering some uncharitable truths about myself. Be that as it may, I have given this character a C, which means her name better start with it.

Oh, Lord. I've just had a very strong feeling that my own name is Charlotte, like the spider in *Charlotte's Web*, which is a legacy nobody can live up to, plus it gives me the added problem that the only two existing characters in my novel so far both have names that start with

C (that's in italics), and I have a hard time with stories where multiple characters have names starting with the same letter. Don't get me going on *The Crucible* or *The Odyssey*. Don't take those as a clue to which grade we're in, either, because we can read those killjoys in any grade if we're advanced readers. Gifted. Talented. Whatever they call it at this school.

"I was just trying to tell you how many calories are in the milk," C says, nodding toward the carton in my hand.

"I was looking for the expiration date," I say, and read it. "October thirsty-first. So we're good."

"You said 'thirsty-first.' That's not a number."

"It should be."

I dissolve them all. I don't care about chocolate milk. I want swords and mayhem.

Chapter Three. Again, the mercy of a fresh chapter.

The sword-wielding boy walks down the beach with his brother. The big one, the older one has all the confidence and looks, so it's the younger one we're interested in. He doesn't have a limp, but he's thinner with that upright posture that old people unconsciously lose after worrying for decades.

It's not a beach because a beach means vacation, happiness, and the novel needs trouble. Only trouble. I'm being unfair to beaches which can obviously have trouble on them especially when they encircle desert islands, but still I'm more of a wasteland girl. Dust. Wind. A dearth of water holes.

She appears on a horse at the top of a hill (ridge), looking into the distance, quite alone. Her people are days behind her and very likely dead by now, though she does not know this. She is looking for the fort, for the cave where the wise people live, where they might have a doctor she can consult for a cure. Her horse shifts its weight beneath her, and she barely registers the movement. Sitting tall, she peers carefully through the twilight, first toward the sunset, west, and then north, examining each curve of the land. There should be smoke by now, if only she could see the smudge against the fading trees. There. Thin and already dissipating, the smoke is slightly lighter than the hillside, and she notes the direction of a corresponding star on the horizon. She knows her stars. She knows her sky.

"Come," she says to her horse, and nudges her heels in his flanks.

Shale starts forward again and lets out a huffle noise.

How easily my mind slips around possibilities. She could be Native American, but I'm not, so I'd be a poseur to write her story. Reversing it, she's a white girl seeking First Peoples to aid her, but that feels contrived. So I cast about for the right setting. Not the Middle Ages in Europe. Not orcs. God no, never orcs. An alternate America, another planet. She's on a horse which tells me something, and the land is wild. We don't have enough Westerns, sadly. Space. Another planet makes the most sense because I can do what I want there, add dragons. A western with a dragon on a different planet. I'd have to make up everything from customs to light switches which could be okay but it isn't funny.

And here's the true confession: I long to write a funny book.

I guess that's a little funny in a pathetic way.

We used to be funny.

When? Really, when were we ever funny?

When that boy gave us a cheesecake in twelfth grade, we felt funny then. I had a cousin who made me laugh, too. The cousin would be on the upper bunk and he'd hang his head over to see me on the bottom one and he'd say something ridiculous while drooling.

This is not a non-novel. This is a non-memoire. Gross.

I have certain expectations, we all do, that a novel will have direction and purpose. It can't wander off into recollections of bunk beds and straw-haired cousin boys with snotty noses. Boogery, rather. It's like third grade when the nun would say focus, focus. The paragraph needs focus, and that turned out to be true of the paragraph. It seems true of the novel, too.

Yet I don't want to write one like that.

You lack conviction. Expertise.

So now we have the extra voices chiming in, do we? It is very, very easy to get the naysayers on board. Hello. Pleased to meet you. Please sabotage this effort to write a novel. Let us bite the apple of shame and taste the failure again and again.

Chapter Four. The delusion of progress.

"What are you doing?" says the strange boy on the bus from the seat behind her.

He doesn't really say this. She only wishes he would because she can hear him talking to his friend, another soccer player, and they're bumping her seat with their knees, and she imagines him noticing her writing in her journal and being curious enough to care. Her blue pen is running out of ink, so she presses harder and holds it closer to her nose where the cool light from the window drops in and turns the thin, blue-lined paper to the blue of milk. If she has to stop

writing, if she has to put down her journal and close it up, she'll have nothing to hide behind for the next 8 minutes of the bus ride home and she'll be a sitting obvious duck for anyone else to ignore or notice, and she'll be keenly aware of the ignoring or the noticing and it will sting in her throat like thirst the whole way home.

Alternately, she could drag her bookbag up from the floor between her legs, set it on her lap, and dig to the grimy bottom where she's pretty sure she has another pen, but already she feels borrowed and fruitless, a bus-riding character with only loneliness to guide her, unless she's in a foreign country, or she's threatened by the thugs outside the bus window, or her brother who will be waiting for her at her bus stop because in this place girls are not supposed to walk home unaccompanied.

Where the ideas come from, she doesn't know. She doesn't trust them, either, or her own slippery mind. She treads the alpine ridge between absolute self-doubt and the determination that she can do this because she can do anything because that's how she wants to live, true and strong, at least in her mind.

And so she lets herself sink inward and linger and poke around gently. She is there, this girl in the next novel. She is watching or lurking in a shadowy space with a veil over her head that could vanish if need be. Come forward we tell her in italics. Let us see you. But it's hard for her to emerge because even revealing her clothing will tell us much about her, and that sets deeper imagining wheels churning because we can't know what she wears until we know where she lives, what fabrics are available, what style of clothing exists there for girls of this age, practically women, actually women, but young women. We don't know what her race is, either, what color her dreams. We know she is far from the chocolate milk of chapter one, but that is all.

They call me Ginger, she says, but it isn't because she has red hair. Her hair is brown, as are her steady eyes and her slender fingers. It's a nickname because people here can't say her real name, Ginjiniearl or something similarly exotic-sounding that betrays how ignorant I am. Already we sense something strong and certain in her, some calming effect she has on us as well as those around her, as if everyone knows she will be a leader someday if she isn't destroyed first by the forces that typically seek out potential rebels and kill them off. Her parents have hidden her carefully for many years. Not entirely. Neighbors know she exists. But they've concealed how bright she is. They've taught her silence and modesty, they've schooled her in the ways of belonging and tradition.

Now something subterranean has shifted. Her parents have died in a freak illness that wiped out her whole town, or neighborhood, or planet, and she must leave. The best anyone can do for her is get her on the last ship with nothing but the trivial item she grabbed from her home on the way out the door, a sheet, a book, a spoon, a poem, something she wishes had more value and which, by its existence as her last sole remaining connection to her old home, becomes unbearably, incalculably precious.

"You can sleep here," the boy says, showing her to a closet and thrusting a hard knob of bread into her hand. It is his own closet, and by giving it to her, he is left to sleep in the crowded ship's hold with all the other refugees, but before she can refuse, he is gone. He has moved off into the shadows, and if she doesn't curl into the closet—it doesn't have a door, it's more of a nook, a bottom shelf—some other child will take it.

She can't cry yet. She's too numb and too scared. Uncertainty has landed on her like a giant stone plate, flattening her to the ground. She can't grasp the crushing truth that her parents and her little brother are all dead and that she has no future with them.

It is not fair for Ginger to pull me so strongly already, girl in transition, girl lost, girl alone. The hold smells like sweat and peanuts, like a peanut gallery, like the floor of the Globe theater where the populace stands enthralled, where the exit signs and the light to the up-going staircase are the only illumination for the last 80 survivors of her planet.

And so it goes. We're never home, but when we try, we glimpse the path.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Writing first drafts is typically murder for me because I have to squash my impulse to control everything and trust the weird, open-ended mindset of pure creativity. I wanted to write a story that captures my anguish, and "The Plot of Lies" is the result. While I've aimed for the story to seem fast and effortless, it involved painstaking revision. I find comfort and hope in the way my character finally expands into reality, and I have the feeling other creatives will relate to her quirky story.*

*I'm drawn to writing that invites us to be honest and take risks. Sally Rooney, Ann Patchett, Malinda Lo, and poet Billie Collins all do this in their own ways, and I find their work inspiring. I cannot express how pleased I am to have my story appearing in **Fleas on the Dog**.*

AUTHOR BIO: Caragh M. O'Brien is the author of the BIRTHMARKED trilogy and THE VAULT OF DREAMERS series, both from Macmillan/Roaring Brook Press. Born in St. Paul, Minnesota, Ms. O'Brien was educated at Williams College and earned her MA from Johns Hopkins University. Once a high school English teacher, she resigned to write young adult novels.