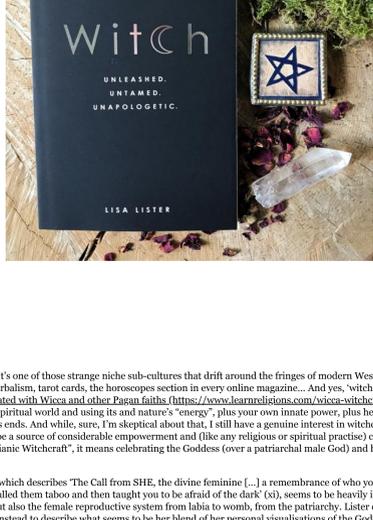


This is where I write about books, movies, late nights and human rights, music, mental health and more. Come and say hi on Twitter @EmmaMCurzon. Pronouns are she/her.

### Book Review: Witch by Lisa Lister- Fiery, fierce- and depressingly faux-feminist

Emma Curzon books, Witchcraft, Women Up June 20, 2020 June 20, 2020 18 Minutes



A copy of Witch (sn't the cover design gorgeous?). Image credit: thecosshop.com

Witchcraft (https://witchcraftway.com). It's one of those strange niche sub-cultures that drift around the fringes of modern Western society, while still being weirdly pervasive throughout much of it - think herbalism, tarot cards, the horoscopes section in every online magazine... And yes, 'witchcraft' here means the relatively young spiritual practise that is **firmly** associated with Wicca and other Pagan faiths (https://www.learnreligions.com/witchcraft-origins/256883), and which supposedly involves interacting with the spiritual world and using its and nature's "energy", plus your own innate power, plus herbs, divination methods, symbols and so on to perform "spells" and achieve various ends. And while, sure, I'm skeptical about that, I still have a genuine interest in witchcraft, and I've done enough reading to know that that, for many practitioners, can be a source of considerable empowerment and (like any religious or spiritual practise) comfort. And for women whose practise involves or is even vaguely inspired by "Dianic Witchcraft", it means celebrating the Goddess (over a patriarchal male God) and her own connection to her, thereby reclaiming her power as a woman.

Lisa Lister's book Witch, the first page of which describes 'The Call from SHE, the divine feminine [...], a remembrance of who you were before Patriarchy put all your fierce and feminine powers into the darkness, called them taboo and then taught you to be afraid of the dark' (63), seems to be heavily influenced by that tradition. She's all about reclaiming, for starters the word *witch*, but also the female reproductive system from labia to womb, from the patriarchy. Lister doesn't claim any association with any particular tradition, however, preferring instead to describe what seems to be her blend of her personal visualisations of the Goddess and 'Mumma Nature', traditions from her family's Traveller and Roma cultures, and particularly Wicca. Her maxims on the power of one's 'pusy' and womb are also mixed in with divination methods and cleansing techniques, tips on how to create your own altar, and the benefits of various crystals, herbs and essential oils. Oh, and she's very keen for readers to know that she's written another book, *Love Your Lady Landscape*, which you certainly won't forget because she mentions it at least once per chapter.



Scene from *The Craft* (1996). Credit: collider.com.

Knowing virtually zilch myself about how to cast the perfect circle or celebrate a woman, I'm not in much of a position to critique how helpful Lister's instructions are, or how well they compare to others'. I am, however, a staunch feminist and English BA student, and can root Lister's writing style and feminist credentials like there's no tomorrow. In a way, the two intersect: her prose, with its repetitive focus on women's collective suffering and divine feminine power, is reminiscent of the old-school (i.e. 1980s-ish) feminist witches, although to be honest it's not nearly as good. Starhawk's *The Spiral Dance* (https://www.live.co.uk/Product/Starhawk/The-Spiral-Dance-A-Rebirth-of-the-Ancient-Religion-of-Wicca-14737200) is far more intricate and better at tempering passion with clear-headedness than Lister's rather heavy-handed, almost juvenile one's. Then again, a fan might describe the book as refreshingly simple and direct with the tone of a confident, extroverted and encouraging friend. I would be willing to praise the likely appeal to younger readers with a preference for short sentences, but this book's problematic features make me deeply uneasy imagining it appealing to anyone (more on this later).

The gatekeeping and restrictive nature of Lister's "feminism", however, utterly contradicts her claims to empowerment and progressivism, and renders the majority of her arguments virtually meaningless.

Warning: As you have probably guessed, the next part of this review may make you "uncomfortable" by doing "unhelpful" things like "bringing race into this". Please be advised this post also contains the assumption that trans women are women, etc. (because trans rights are human rights, bitch).

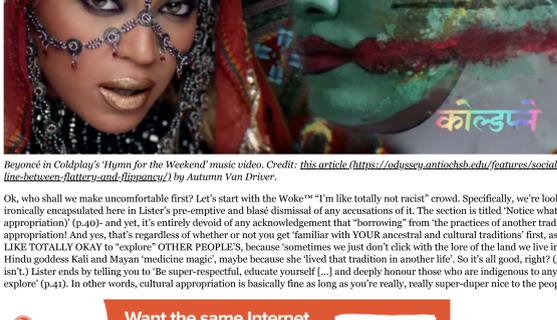


Image of feminist rally, from this article (https://www.marieclaire.co.uk/news/news-study-finds-one-five-uk-wirks-bulled-period-657646) by Marie Claire.

Ok, who shall we make uncomfortable first? Let's start with the Wake! "I'm like totally not racist" crowd. Specifically, we're looking at cultural appropriation, a faux-pas ironically encapsulated here in Lister's pre-emptive and blasé dismissal of any accusations of it. The section is titled 'Notice what's around you (and a note on cultural appropriation)' (p.40)- and yet, it's entirely devoid of any acknowledgement that "borrowing" from "the practices of another tradition" IS in and of itself cultural appropriation! And yes, that's regardless of whether or not you get "familiar with YOUR ancestral and cultural traditions" first, as Lister suggests. Also, according to her it **LIKE TOTALLY OKAY** to "explore" OTHER PEOPLES, because "sometimes we just don't click with the lore of the land we live in". Heck, Lister's practise includes the Hindu goddess Kali and Mayan "medicine magic", maybe because she "lived that tradition in another life". So it's all good, right? (Answer: no. No, it's not. It really, really isn't.) Lister ends by telling you to 'Be super-respectful, educate yourself [...], and deeply honour those who are indigenous to any particular tradition and practise you explore' (p.41). In other words, cultural appropriation is basically fine as long as you're really, really super-duper nice to the people whose cultures you're appropriating.

As I mentioned earlier, Lister is kind of obsessed with the female reproductive system. A witch, she writes, is a woman who's 'connected, pussy to the earth' (p.xiii) and who is in touch with 'your womb space' and 'all the magic and power you hold there' (p.88); she goes on a lot about the menstrual cycle, too. And yes, this isn't all bad- like I said, removing the stigmas and degrading beliefs surrounding the vagina, periods, pregnancy etc. is a worthy feminist goal. Reading *Witch*, however, you'd think that for a woman practising witchcraft, her vagina, ovaries and womb- revered in Lister's practise for its life-making properties- are more important than any other part of her. Aside from being annoying for women like me, who don't want to ever make or raise babies, and for post-menopausal women, women who've had hysterectomies etc. (although Lister reassures these women that 'that's okay, the energetic imprint still holds power'), this is already pretty troubling because it's only cisgender women that all of these qualifiers apply to. If I was a trans woman, or even an intersex woman with, say, testes instead of ovaries, I'd feel completely and utterly excluded by Lister's definition of our gender. Not to mention, her constant association of female sex organs with womanhood and vice versa is also alienating towards trans men and non-binary AFAB people, who often face prejudice that was dismissed over that same connection.

Little did I know on first reading that this was just the tip of the iceberg. While researching for this review, I stumbled on other people's- namely, **Danyae Colles**' (https://www.pinkpanther.com/reviews/witch-lisa-lister/) and **Jayna Colles**' (https://www.centralsouthcoast.com.au/) (now deleted!) that described and quoted a passage that wasn't in my copy. In this passage, Lister writes that I'll piss off men for not addressing them as witches. I'll piss off the transgender community for not addressing them either. Yet this is the work I do. I do women's work, and I'm definitely not going to apologise for that' (p.xviii). (Yet, as I mentioned, you apparently won't find this passage in recent printings. I only have the photograph I've included below thanks to the generosity of another reviewer, Amina, who very kindly sent them to me via Jo.)

In other words, we have a callous, faux-sympathetic dismissal of trans people on two counts: firstly, the implication that women who belong to 'the transgender community' are trans first and women second, if at all, and don't belong in a book that is implicitly segregated from "real" men as well as women. Secondly, the lumping in of all trans people- male, female and non-binary- into a separated third category, that's publicly segregated from "real" men as well as women. Charming.

Oh- and did I say 'trans-exclusionary'? Well, buckle up, because this is where it gets really weird.



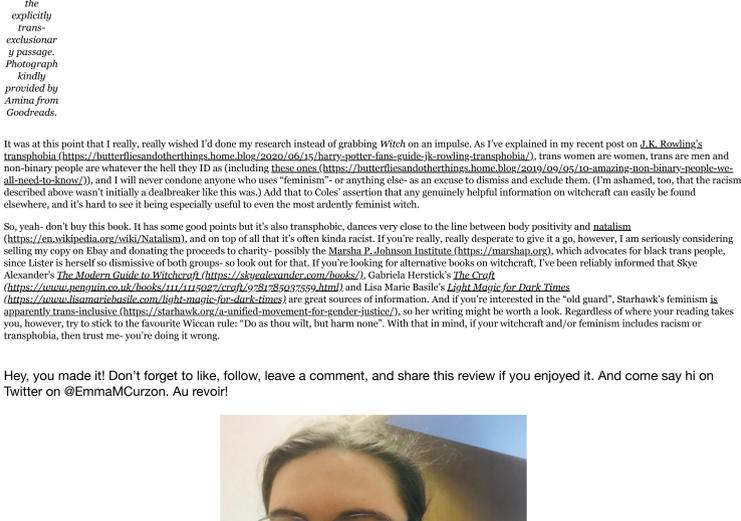
Stylis for trans witches, reading "I am seen as female" and "I am seen as male". Credit: @strangesylis on Tumblr.

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The version of 'Witch' containing the explicitly trans-exclusionary passage. Photograph kindly provided by Amina from Goodreads.

It was at this point that I really, really wished I'd done my research instead of grabbing *Witch* on an impulse. As I've explained in my recent post on **L.K. Rowling's transphobia** (https://butterfliesandotherthings.home.blog/2020/06/15/harry-potter-fans-guide-to-reading-transphobia/), trans women are women, trans are men and non-binary people are whatever the hell they ID as (including **thes ones** (https://butterfliesandotherthings.home.blog/2019/09/05/10-amazing-non-binary-people-we-all-need-to-know/)), and I will never condone anyone who uses "feminism" - or anything else- as an excuse to dismiss and exclude them. (I'm ashamed, too, that the **weird** (https://www.pinkpanther.com/reviews/witch-lisa-lister/)) and **Jayna Colles**' (https://www.centralsouthcoast.com.au/) and Lisa Marie Basile's *Light Magic for Dark Times* (https://www.lisamariebasile.com/light-magic-for-dark-times) are great sources of information. And if you're interested in the "old guard", Starhawk's feminism is apparently trans-inclusive (https://starhawk.org/a-unified-movement-for-gender-justice/), so her writing might be worth a look. Regardless of where your reading takes you, however, try to stick to the favourite Wiccan rule: "Do as thou wilt, but harm none". With that in mind, if your witchcraft and/or feminism includes racism or transphobia, then trust me- you're doing it wrong.

Hey, you made it! Don't forget to like, follow, leave a comment, and share this review if you enjoyed it. And come say hi on Twitter at @EmmaMCurzon. Au revoir!



Me, trying to look badass s in my new-ish fabric mask!

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Tagged: book review, books, cultural appropriation, feminist witchcraft, Lisa Lister, spirituality, trans-exclusionary, transphobia, while feminism, Wicca, Witchcraft

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### 3 thoughts on "Book Review: Witch by Lisa Lister- Fiery, fierce- and depressingly faux-feminist"

Ash Williams says: June 20, 2020 at 8:20 pm Hey :-) Sorry for taking so long to reply- Thank you so much for bringing this to everyone's attention as you wouldn't necessarily expect to come across that in a book like this. It is awful how people use feminism as a way of disregarding trans and non binary people, there's just no need for it!

Soph. (Book, Blog & Candle) says: July 1, 2020 at 7:12 pm I loved your review and thanks for the heads up! I definitely don't want to support someone who is transphobic and racist! Your mask is super cute as well ❤️

Emma Curzon says: July 22, 2020 at 8:20 pm Hey :-) Sorry for taking so long to reply- Thank you so much for your lovely comments on this and the Potter/transphobia post, they really brightened my day. Glad you liked the mask too! ❤️