

Caroline Hooten

“The Witch Elm” Book Review

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Tana French dives into the frightening effects of losing everything you know about yourself and the world in her psychological thriller, “The Witch Elm.” The New York Times bestselling author of the Dublin Murder Squad series, French demonstrates her murder mystery mastery with her first stand alone novel published in 2018. In the same thriller vein as her first novel, “In the Woods,” “The Witch Elm” explores the disaster that ensues when Toby Hennessy, sheltered by luck his entire life, suddenly finds his perception of the world shattered by a series of wretched events. While highlighting the timely issue of the justice system’s failure to sexual assault survivors, French’s exploration of the mind, one's fragile sense of self and the length’s one will go to regain that sense prove chilling in “The Witch Elm.”

Toby eases through most of life without any misfortunes until one night two burglars almost beat him to death in his home, forever altering his mind and body. As Toby painfully tries to readjust to life, he finds out that his uncle, Hugo, is dying of cancer, so he moves in with him. While Toby’s cousins, Susanna and Leon, are visiting, Susanna’s children find a skull in the hole of a wych elm tree in the garden, the impetus of a revealing investigation.

The detectives discover that the skull belonged to Dominic, a friend of Toby’s back in school, who people presumed ended his own life. Convinced the detectives believe that he murdered Dominic, Toby tries to fill the gaps in his memory, fragmented by brain damage, but ends up convincing himself that he is the murderer.

Susanna eventually shares the truth with Toby of how Dominic repeatedly sexually assaulted her, so she and Leon killed him. They both describe how powerful they felt, and Toby

yearns for this same transformation. This longing leads Toby to kill a detective, but the murder only leaves him feeling empty in the end.

Toby's inner dialogue throughout the novel paints a vivid picture of this fragile sense of self that French successfully explores in her writing. After the night of the attack, Toby describes his altered mind: "The thing I couldn't bear wasn't the burglars or blows to the head, wasn't anything I could beat or evade or set up defense against; it was myself, whatever that had become" (83). Brain damage can completely alter one's perception of oneself, a truly terrifying thought that French grapples with through Toby, as she establishes a tone of dread through his alarming inner confessions. The attack is the catalyst for the following horrors, each of which French also masterfully ties back to that night Toby's luck ran out. When the skull is discovered in the tree, Toby recounts feeling the same as when he found the burglars in his home: "One blink, one glance to the side, and when you look again everything is different" (163). Another result of the attack, Toby's memory gaps leave him susceptible to manipulation, as the detectives and Susanna cause him to convince himself that he is the murderer. Toby expresses himself as "this formless thing, boneless, grotesque, squashed like Play-Doh into whatever shape the boss of the day wanted to see: I was sick of it" (475). French's use of devices, such as this metaphor of Play-Doh, flawlessly portrays the effects of Toby losing himself. The way French writes Toby's inner dialogue, ripe with descriptive words and metaphors, creates a sense of utter despair and terrifies the reader of the delicacy of the mind.

Within the narrative of the unraveling of Toby's life, French weaves a potent message about the flaws in the justice system in addressing sexual assault. Susanna tells Toby about the several times Dominic sexually assaulted her, including groping her and putting his hands up her skirt. Susanna recounts how she reported the sexual assault to the police, but they only laughed

because “Dominic was a rich kid from a fancy school, his parents would’ve gone ballistic and hired big-shot lawyers and filed a million complaints” (415). The police’s unwillingness to pursue the accusations due to the perpetrators’ status and gender is a common injustice victims of sexual assault face that often discourages women from reporting their abuse. This injustice prompted the Me Too movement, calling for change in the justice system and rape culture and emboldening more women to tell their stories. French portrays all of these issues in “The Witch Elm,” seamlessly adding an important social commentary and a sense of timeliness to this murder mystery.

The abuse Susanna faced left her feeling powerless, just as Toby feels a sense of powerlessness in the loss of his old self, and the lengths they go to to regain themselves prove appalling. When Toby asks how they could kill Dominic, Susanna asks if anyone has ever belittled him and what he wanted to do to them, imploring him to think about what it would feel like if he had. Toby imagines, “Air rushed into my chest and for an enormous light-headed moment I felt it: the impossible ecstasy of it, almost too huge to be survived, the vast lightning rush of power” (452). This is the feeling Susanna says she experienced after killing Dominic, a complete transformation with a new sense of power. This desire for metamorphosis pilots Toby in his final devastating act of killing the detective. During the murder, Toby’s mind replays his conversation with Susanna, “The holy rapture of it, the painless lightning running in my bones. Rising on the far side of that river into a world that was finally mine again” (482). The reader can feel Toby’s desperation for his old self and his ecstasy in believing that he was about to achieve it through French’s pictorial choice of words. When Toby never attains the transformation he seeks, he is left questioning who he is without luck, proving French’s genius in bringing Toby

full circle in the end back to this theme of luck. The thrill within French's novel lies within her talent in illustrating the frailty of the mind and what can happen when it is broken.

“The Witch Elm” is a psychological thriller in the best sense with the main character unsure of himself and the perpetual sense of dread created by the string of tragedies that follow as he tries to answer this question. Fans of murder mystery novels will be fully engulfed in French's mind twisting thriller that will keep them grasping for the truth, along with Toby, until the very end.