

Book Review: *No One Is Talking About This* by Patricia Lockwood – Tragedy in the Time of Social Media

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From chronically online to a baby born with “Elephant Man” syndrome – a woman’s life is turned upside down as she has to reconsider her priorities in life.

No One Is Talking About This is asking a relevant question in the age of social media: Why are we wasting so much of our time on irrelevant online discourses? Aren’t there enough real problems in our real lives? Patricia Lockwood’s debut novel won the Dylan Thomas Award 2022 and has been shortlisted for various critically acclaimed awards, including the Booker Prize and the Women’s Prize for Fiction. Events from Lockwood’s life served as inspiration for her novel, which consists of two parts. First, we follow the unnamed female protagonist as she navigates her life on the fictional social media platform “portal,” where she has risen to relative fame due to her post asking “Can dogs be twins?”(13). This all happens before a family tragedy radically changes her life. The second half of the book revolves around the protagonist’s newborn niece who suffers from Proteus syndrome. Also known as “Elephant Man” disease, this rare genetic disorder lets the skin, bones, muscles, fatty tissues, and blood and lymphatic vessels to grow indefinitely.

The novel deals with social media and the lives we lead online as well as grief and the importance of family. Lockwood experiments stylistically with stream of consciousness and other modernist techniques. While the first half of the novel functions without a plot, or what we would normally expect in terms of storytelling, the second half contains autofictional elements and depicts how the birth of a disabled child impacts the people closest to them. Lockwood’s novel thus defies traditional notions of plot and genre conventions. To a certain extent, her narrative style is reminiscent of Sally Rooney with her close focus on her characters and distinct narrative voice. The title refers to the feeling of the unnamed protagonist after the medical miracle of her niece’s birth who was deemed unable to live. As the protagonist “feels lifted out of the stream of regular life,” she feels the need to stop people on the street to shout at them “Do you know about this? You should know about this. No one is talking about this!” (145).

The narrative situation captures how scrolling on social media feels, jumping from topic to topic, from argument to counter-argument, being caught in the never-ending stream of infinite opinions. Lockwood’s writing evokes the endless scroll of social media so much that the readers

can simultaneously imagine the posts and images she alludes to. “Of course when the eclipse came, the dictator stared directly into it, as if to say that nature had no dominion over him either” (24) evokes the iconic photo of Trump staring directly into the sun.

The novel blurs the line between fiction and reality, literary and online language. The characters sometimes speak as if directly quoting from posts that they had read online the day before, emojis have become part of the protagonist’s internal monologue. The tragedy the family experiences is also represented in the language, which, as they take a step back from social media to show the little girl how beautiful life could have been, distances itself from the style of online discourses. While the first half of the novel kept my interest by simulating the experience of social media and discovering memes, discourses, and images I recognized, I couldn’t help asking myself: Where is this going? But as the tragedy unfolds and we are following the numbered days of the baby born with a genetic mutation, the irrelevance of the social media discussions on which we spend so much of our daily lives becomes even more obvious. *No One Is Talking About This* is not a novel about politics but it is political. Written in the Trump era, references to the then-president as “the dictator” seem a bit on the nose. But asking the question of who should be able to afford health insurance to keep living is a dividing topic in America today.

Although it is short (with only about 200 pages), the novel takes the reader on a journey from the depths of the internet to the question of what gives our lives meaning. Its experimental style challenges us to reflect more closely about the impact of social media and the emotional turmoil of grief.

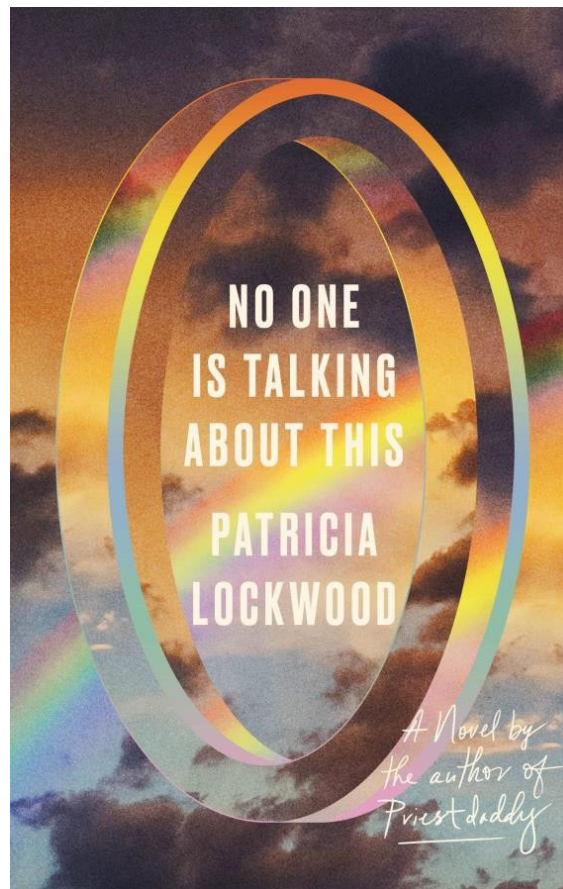


Figure 1. *No One Is Talking About This* was published by Riverhead Books.

Patricia Lockwood is a U.S.-American poet, essayist, and novelist. She has written for the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, the *New Republic* and is a contributing editor of the *London Review of Books*. Her debut novel *No One is Talking About This* was published by Riverhead Books in February 2021 and has been a strong contender for multiple awards. *No One is Talking About This* was shortlisted for the 2021 Booker Prize and the Women's Prize for Fiction 2021, was one of the *New York Times*' "10 Best books of 2021," and won the 2022 Dylan Thomas Prize. Lockwood has also written the memoir *Priestdaddy* in 2017, which won the Thurber Prize for American Humor, and the poetry collections *Balloon Pop*, *Outlaw Black* and *Motherland Fatherland Homelandsexuals*.

Lockwood was born in Indiana and raised in "all the worst cities of the Midwest." She often lived in Catholic rectories because of her father's profession as a priest. She did not go to college but instead focused on her career as a writer and poet. After joining Twitter, she quickly amassed a following for her comedy, poems, and series of "sexts." Lockwood currently lives in Savannah, Georgia where she is working on a new novel and a collection of short stories.

Author Biography

Carolin Wachsmann studies the double degree Master of Education (English and History) and Master of Arts (North American Studies) at Leibniz University Hannover. In 2021, she received her bachelor's degree in English and History. Her research interests are English literature, popular culture and fan studies, and postcolonial theory. When she is not reading or writing, she spends too much of her free time on social media.