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# Exposing Narrative Ideologies of Victimhood in Emma Donoghue's Room and Gillian Flynn's Gone Girl

Meredith Jeffers  
*Syracuse University*

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**Exposing Narrative Ideologies of Victimhood in  
Emma Donaghue's *Room* and Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl***

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the  
Renée Crown University Honors Program at Syracuse University

Meredith Jeffers  
Candidate for B.A. Degree  
And Renée Crown University Honors  
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Honors Capstone Project in English & Textual Studies

Capstone Project Advisor: \_\_\_\_\_  
Chris Forster, Professor of English

Capstone Project Reader: \_\_\_\_\_  
Dana Olwan, Professor of Women's & Gender Studies

Honors Director: \_\_\_\_\_  
Stephen Kuusisto, Director

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## Abstract

Stories about abducted women and murdered wives are sadly common on cable and network news programs, from *Nancy Grace* to *Dateline*. These are at the center of Emma Donaghue's *Room* (2010) and Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012). These contemporary novels manipulate the narrative conventions of popular true-crime stories to expose the

In each chapter, I examine the interesting narrative perspectives of *Room* and *Gone Girl* to understand the ways that these novels deconstruct mass media narratives of violence to reveal ideas about gender. In *Room*, Donaghue dislocates the narration by narrating the novel not from the perspective of the abducted captive, but her five-year-old son, Jack. Unaware that he and his mother are captives of her abductor, Jack's narration is often confusing, forcing readers to experience the captivity narrative anew. Where Donaghue imposes an ignorance of narrative conventions through Jack, Flynn narrates Nick and Amy Dunne, the couple at the heart of *Gone Girl*, as masters. In keeping with the narrative expectations that when a wife goes missing, you assume her husband did it, all eyes turn to Nick after Amy's disappearance. But in Flynn's novel, both characters are hyper-aware of this fact. The stark contrast between ignorance of conventions and mastery of them in *Room* and *Gone Girl* reveals the constructedness of the true-crime narratives.

I close by turning to this year's *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* in a brief coda. In this sitcom, about a woman who readjusts to life after fifteen years of captivity in a bunker, comedy becomes a device to emphasize resilience after violence.

Finally, this project seeks to contextualize *Room*, *Gone Girl*, and *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* within the current mass media climate so as to reveal the ways that such fictional narratives contested the conventions of true-crime accounts of violence against women.

## Executive Summary

In my Capstone, I analyze two contemporary novels, Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010) and Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2012), with interesting narrative perspectives. In the former, five-year-old Jack narrates his captivity; the latter is dually narrated by Nick and Amy Dunne, the husband and wife at the center of the novel. Donoghue and Flynn each take a version of a popular true-crime story—the missing woman—and expose its gender constructions through these unconventional narrative perspectives.

In order to reveal the ways in which these novels reveal the underlying ideologies of gender, it is important to situate *Room* and *Gone Girl* into the current true-crime media climate. I draw on key passages within both novels that show a direct interaction between the texts and the broader mass media for this project's introduction. In *Room*, a figure called the puffy-hair woman, similar to someone like Oprah Winfrey, hosts a sit-down interview with Jack's mother, whom he refers to as Ma. Although she claims that this is a chance for Ma to tell *her* story, the puffy-hair woman commands the interview, attempting to force Ma into ossified categories of victimhood. Her tense scriptedness causes Jack great discomfort.

In *Gone Girl*, the true-crime personality is Ellen Abbott, a caricature of Nancy Grace. Where the puffy-hair woman seeks to highlight Ma's triumph, Ellen seeks to clinch Nick's guilt. She is shrill and brash, making pathological claims about Nick's masculinity to make him seem suspicious. While Jack can not understand his own discomfort with the puffy-hair woman, Nick is keenly self-aware of the effect that Ellen Abbott has on his public perception. Contextualizing these differences in how the protagonists interact with the media is key in that it represents a larger dichotomy that structures this thesis—ignorance of narrative conventions versus mastery of them.

The first chapter examines *Room*. Born into captivity, Jack spends his days with his beloved mother, called Ma in the novel, in an eleven-by-eleven foot woodshed, unaware that the two are captives of his mother's abductor. Because of both his age and his upbringing, Jack is oblivious to the narratives that presuppose Ma as a victim after their release. His perspective is often confusing, as his wild imagination and shaky concept of the outside world hinder his ability to distinguish the real from the unreal. The confusion in his perspective, however, forces readers to experience the conventions of captivity anew, free from the ideologies that try to reaffirm Ma's victimization.

Chapter two shows how, in *Gone Girl*, Nick and Amy assert a complete awareness of the ways in which the media frames narratives of violence. Nick knows he seems guilty based on the media, if nothing else, and Amy's diary corroborates this narrative by revealing the growing volatility of her husband. What distinguishes *Gone Girl*, however, is the plot twist conventional to literary thriller; Amy's diary, Flynn reveals, is a work of fiction constructed by Amy to draw the attention of the public. Amy exhibits a kind of mastery over these narratives and their operations, all to her own advantage. She does not eschew conventions; she *is* the convention.

Finally, a brief coda turns to this year's *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, a sitcom created by Tina Fey. In the show, Kimmy Schmidt (Ellie Kemper) adjusts to life in New York City after fifteen years in an Indiana bunker, where she was held captive by a doomsday preacher. Kimmy's blissful naivety upon her return to the outside world contrasts the sensationalized news coverage her reappearance sparks. In the progression from true-crime media depictions to fictional retellings of violence, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* shows an interesting shift to comedy as a narrative tactic to expose media constructions of victimhood.

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I'd also like to thank my thesis reader, Dana Olwan, for complicating everything I thought I knew about feminism and literature.

Lastly, I am grateful to my thesis advisor, Chris Forster, for guiding me throughout this entire process. I can say without hesitation that my thinking has expanded in ways I never knew possible. This wouldn't be half the project it is without your guidance.

## **Advice to Future Honors Students**

The greatest advice I received in the past two years, and the advice I'd like to pass along to future students, came from my thesis advisor, Chris Forster, after I lamented about being so stuck and in my head that I thought I'd never finish: *Just write the thing.*





## Introduction

A news report—a beautiful woman has disappeared. Perhaps she was snatched by a stranger and kept captive; perhaps she has vanished after growing tensions with her increasingly hostile husband. These sorts of stories are immediately recognizable. And they are at the center of Emma Donaghue’s *Room* and Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl*. Donaghue’s novel, published in 2010, focuses on a young woman, known only as Ma, and her five-year-old son Jack as they go about their lives in an eleven-by-eleven woodshed. It is in this space that the two are held captive by Ma’s abductor, a man the novel refers to as Old Nick. In *Gone Girl* (2012), Nick Dunne returns home on the morning of his fifth wedding anniversary to find the front door wide open, the living room trashed, and his wife Amy gone. This event triggers the initial mystery of the novel: is Amy dead, and did Nick do it?

Similar narratives appear in the news with alarming frequency: *Nancy Grace*, *48 Hours Investigates*, and *20/20* all offer these kinds of narratives. Even the characters within the novels understand the pervasiveness of true-crime narratives;<sup>1</sup> when Nick is initially interviewed by the police, he thinks, "It's always the husband. Everyone knows it's always the husband, so why can't they just say it: *We suspect you because you are the husband, and it's always the husband. Just watch Dateline*" (Flynn 43). Here Flynn exploits readerly

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<sup>1</sup> Various terms used throughout this paper are critical to understanding how these novels manipulate narrative conventions. “Mass media” and “true-crime media” refer to the network and cable news programs that construct narratives of gendered violence. Think: *20/20*, *Dateline*, and *Nancy Grace*.

knowledge of the ways the true-crime industry operates in its creation of violent narratives, thanks in part to a process Flynn calls “the selection and the packaging of a tragedy” (Lee). Readers know just as well as Nick that the detectives assume his guilt because it often *is* the husband. Scott and Laci Peterson, whose case Flynn pointed to as a parallel to *Gone Girl*, offer the real-life model for Nick and Amy Dunne. The murder of Laci Peterson was frequently featured on cable news for years (Dockterman). Attempting to pinpoint a reason for the nation’s obsession with this crime, Tom Rosenstiel notes how formulaic such narratives are:

The morning network shows and cable television have a need for a certain kind of tabloid story where the facts of the story are very simple and don't change very much. It's like a soap opera: You can go away for months at a time and you can come back and plug right back into the plot. (Booth)

The ability to tune in and out of cable news coverage without ever missing a thing highlights the repetitive formulas of the true-crime genre. Even though the Peterson trial has long since ended—Peterson was found guilty more than a decade ago and now awaits execution in California—the same stories of gendered violence are told again and again.

What is it, exactly, that makes stories about women killed by their husbands, or women kidnapped and held captive by strangers, so compelling? In “The Oldest Story: Toward a Theory of a Dead Girl Show,” Alice Bolin traces the “Dead Girl” as a trope throughout television dramas such as *Twin Peaks*, *True*

*Detective*, and *Pretty Little Liars*. In narratives of the Dead Girl, the disappearance or death of a young woman, usually within the first minutes of a pilot episode or first pages of a novel, incites the conflict. Her body becomes a site of redemption for those investigating her death—the FBI agents, the troubled detectives, the estranged best friends. The Dead Girl, however, is “not a ‘character’ in the show, but rather, the memory of her is.” She exists inasmuch as her death reveals an “existential knowledge” to those around her. This narrative, then, posits the Dead Girl as the embodiment of “the oldest story” referenced in the article’s title: the story of light versus dark. The Dead Girl represents purity and goodness, and the violence enacted against her an ultimate evil. It is a narrative that triggers anxiety by “[broadening] the effect and the meaning of an individual murder” to reveal the messiness of the light and dark dichotomy (Bolin).

When this narrative appears in true-crime media, the light and dark contrast retains its gendered rigidity, with all the key figures, and even the conclusion, set out from the start. If a viewer tunes into *Nancy Grace* and catches a segment on a pretty, missing wife, he or she can assume with relative confidence that the woman’s husband probably did it. This is one of the specific constructions of light versus dark that saturate the mass media. There are, however, additional conventions for what crimes—and whose bodies—end up in the media. Eugene Robinson notes that such narratives disproportionately focus on pretty, affluent white women—what he calls the Missing White Woman Syndrome. According to Robinson, it is the “meta-narrative of something seen as

precious and delicate being snatched away, defiled, destroyed by evil forces that lurk in the shadows, just outside the bedroom” that makes this perverse obsession so pervasive (Robinson). Bolin reveals a similar logic with the Dead Girl, as it is key for texts with this character to “cast girls as wild, vulnerable creatures who need to be protected from their own sexualities” in order to expose a grand truth about humanity from her death (Bolin). The trope of the missing white woman, a role situated in a long literary legacy of white, female victimhood, from seventeenth-century captive Mary Rowlandson to David Lynch’s Laura Palmer, values the female victim by reaffirming her role as daughter, mother, sister, or wife. The attack against the missing woman, then, becomes an attack against a certain kind of conventionalized femininity more broadly, one that is white and imperiled.

*Room* and *Gone Girl* expose these gender ideologies in mass media narratives of gendered violence. Both novels depend on a readership who recognize stories like those in *Room* and *Gone Girl* from the wider set of true-crime narratives covered by the news—those of Laci Peterson and Elizabeth Smart, and so on. At one level, these stories are valuable additions to a broader discourse about gendered violence. With discussions about domestic violence and sexual assault on college campuses and in the military gaining national attention, it is now, perhaps more than ever, important to give recognition to narratives of violence. It is also important to recognize that the true-crime media constructs these narratives not simply in the service of advocacy or justice, but entertainment. Analyzing the ideological implications of such narratives does not

mean denying the actual accounts of violence. What both *Room* and *Gone Girl* show is how true-crime media enforces specific narrative perspectives that reify conventional ideas that link femininity intrinsically to victimhood.<sup>2</sup> Such conventions and expectations are present in Flynn's and Donaghue's novels. In *Room*, for example, Ma's refusal to sympathize with her captor after her escape shocks the public, which expects—and perhaps wants—her to feel “emotionally dependent” on Old Nick, as though she has “Stockholm syndrome” (Donaghue 232); in *Gone Girl*, Amy embodies the “sweet missing pregnant lady” that television personalities “can't resist” (Flynn 259). Seen through the true-crime media, Ma and Amy are both victims of what Bolin describes as the “[externalized] impulse to prey on young [women],” as though it is “both inevitable and beyond the control of men” to enact violence (Bolin). These novels dislocate narratives of gendered violence, manipulating narrative perspectives so as to highlight mass media constructions of gender. It is critical, therefore, to study the interactions between narrative structure and gender constructs in these novels. Robyn R. Warhol describes feminist narratology as “the study of narrative structures and strategies in the context of cultural constructions of gender” (Warhol 6). Situating the novels in the context of *Nancy Grace* and *Dateline*, then, emphasizes the ideologies that mass media narratives offer, and to which the novels respond.

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<sup>2</sup> When a woman deviates from this script, often by assuming the role of predator rather than prey, it is her sexuality and (potential lack of) mental wellness that ends up on display; instead of victim, she is the “psycho bitch” (Hess).

To expose these narrative constructions, Donaghue and Flynn shift conventional narrative perspective by re-narrating familiar stories in unfamiliar ways. Instead of narrating *Room* from Ma's perspective, five-year-old Jack narrates. His point-of-view is at times disorienting and alienating, in part because he is not even aware that he and Ma are captives. Yet the reader, familiar with stories of Elizabeth Smart, Jaycee Dugard, and the Cleveland kidnappings, can still understand the conventions of captivity, even if Jack cannot. *Gone Girl* similarly complicates its familiar narrative by allowing its principal characters to each narrate the novel's events. Nick narrates the novel beginning on the day of Amy's disappearance and proceeding forward, while chapters from Amy's diary start when she and Nick first meet and move toward the date of her disappearance. Even as they take up narratives familiar from TV, neither *Room* nor *Gone Girl* narrates the story in the same way as the media.

The distance of these novels from their mass media counterparts is made explicit through the ways in which Flynn and Donaghue represent the mass media within their novels. Accounts of the missing white woman are covered so often that these stories end up predigested for readers, something that both novels exploit when untangling the connections between mass media narratives and their gender constructions. For example, the missing white woman trope and its emphasis on conventional gender roles restricts both Ma and Amy, but to different effects. Every one of Ma's actions and choices as a mother, such as her decision to continue breastfeeding Jack, are met with intense media scrutiny following her escape; Amy's devotion as a wife turns her into America's

sweetheart as suspicion lands on Nick. By highlighting the mass media's focus on Ma and Amy's roles as mother and wife, Donaghue and Flynn expose the ideological conventions of femininity that undergird narratives of violence.

One such example in *Room* can be seen when Ma interviews with the “puffy-hair woman,” an Oprah Winfrey-like figure who exclusively interviews people who have endured tragedy and hardship. These subjects range from the man with one leg to a “man who used to be a golf star”—a timely reference, considering that news of Tiger Woods' infidelity and subsequent fall from grace broke just a year before the publication of *Room* (61). This is just one of the many ways in which Donaghue situates Ma and Jack's story into a mass media cycle that makes a spectacle out of violence. As in *Gone Girl*, these novels reveal how violence against women is remediated by the media. Once Ma and Jack escape, the media attention is immediate and intense. The Dead Girl trope, so reliant on the absence of a woman, whether through disappearance or death, mutates in cases like Ma's. Instead of her memory framing the way that the public views her, it is now her miraculous return. After agreeing to a sit-down interview with the puffy-hair woman, she explains that television viewers consider Ma a “beacon of hope” and a “talisman of goodness” for having survived her captivity (235).

But Ma does not feel like any such beacon or talisman. In the reality of the novel, Ma is struggling to readjust to life outside of Room. When a lawyer tells Ma about “[intense] interest from a number of networks” and how she “might consider doing a book, down the road,” Ma becomes combative: “You think we should sell ourselves before somebody else does” (202). Despite her resistance,



however, the need for financial security outweighs her hesitations. Although the puffy-hair woman tells Ma that “we’re just trying to help *you* tell *your* story to the world” (232), Ma is not interested in telling her story, however, and has only agreed to be interviewed in the first place so she can earn money “for Jack’s college fund” (230). Jack describes the interview from a naïve perspective, observing a scene that readers—better acquainted with the conventions of such narratives—will understand better than Jack can. The tell-all interview is an uncomfortable and highly publicized event that follows the end of immense trauma, like Ma’s captivity. Because Jack is unaware of, and so oblivious to, the standard proceedings of the talk show tell-all, however, he is unable to comprehend the tensions that underlie the interview between Ma and the puffy-hair woman. This very limitation, however, allows Donaghue to reveal the ways in which these events, and the narratives they produce, are constructed by the ideological expectations of femininity. The puffy-hair woman opens up the interview: “Let me first express my gratitude, and the gratitude of all our viewers, for talking to us a mere six days after your release. For refusing to be silenced any longer” (232). The constructedness of the puffy-hair woman’s persona is clear to Jack; that she uses a “special voice” to speak further emphasizes the falseness with which she acts. Because Jack does not understand *why* she puts on this persona, and to what effect, his naïve description of seeing such an interview for the first time forces the reader to see the conventions anew as well. Jack’s discomfort with the puffy-hair woman highlights how these conventions ultimately manipulate audiences. The malleability of the puffy-hair woman’s

persona appears, both to Jack and readers, as inauthentic. The script has already been written, and it is up to Ma to stick to it.

As the interview progresses, its falseness becomes even more evident, as seen in the following exchange, which shows the puffy-hair woman responding to Ma's insistence that she was wholly ordinary before her captivity:

“And now you're an extraordinary young woman with an extraordinary tale to tell, and we're honored that it's we, that it's us—” The woman looks away, to one of the persons with the machines. “Let's try that again.” She looks back at Ma and does the special voice. “And we're honored that you've chosen this show to tell it.” (233)

One of the key ways in which this representation of the mass media works in *Room* is to reveal its conventionalized constructedness. Ma is expected to tell her story, no matter how difficult it is, because it is what the media and the viewers want. But it is not Ma's true story specifically that the media wants, but the story of the triumphant, inspiring mother. She is expected to recapitulate the narratives that make her, in the perspective of the puffy-hair woman, “extraordinary.” There is an uncomfortable voyeurism to these interactions, made even more visible by Ma's resistance to the puffy-hair woman. The blatant fixation that the puffy-hair woman has on crafting—and thereby controlling—Ma's story uncovers the tensions between mass media and subject.

The tensions over control are made clear in *Gone Girl*, as well, through a brash figure similar to Nancy Grace. Where Winfrey praises triumph, Grace

exploits outrage through her particular “take-no-prisoners courtroom approach.” A former prosecutor whose “cases often involved murder, rape and child molestation,” now hosting her own eponymous cable program, Grace is known for her thick Texas drawl and over-the-top style of reporting (Bio). (When Casey Anthony was acquitted of her daughter’s murder in 2011, Grace memorably shouted, “The devil is dancing tonight!”) In *Gone Girl*, this exaggerated television personality is Ellen Abbott, host of *Ellen Abbott Live*, which Nick describes as a “cable show specializing in missing, murdered women, starring the permanently furious Ellen Abbott, a former prosecutor and victims' rights advocate” (Flynn 161). Grace is easily detectable as the model for the figure Nick describes:

The show opened with Ellen, blow-dried and lip-glossed, glaring at the camera. “A shocking story to report today: a beautiful, young woman who was the inspiration for the *Amazing Amy* book series. *Missing*. House torn *apart*. Hubby is Lance Nicholas Dunne, an *unemployed writer* who now owns a *bar* he *bought* with his wife’s *money*. Want to know how worried he is? These are photos taken since his wife, Amy Elliott Dunne, went missing July fifth—their *five-year anniversary*.” [emphasis in the original] (161)

What follows on the program are images of Nick smiling and posing with (attractive, female) search team volunteers. The italicized phrases and words in Ellen’s dialogue work not only to emphasize Nick and Amy's characters—while Amy is “beautiful” and wealthy, her husband is a mooch—but also to emphasize the ideological conventions that the media constructs. It is precisely *because* Amy

is beautiful and her husband is an “unemployed writer” that their case receives media attention. Ellen’s exaggerated tone, with every italicized phrase signaling another point to create anger, vilifies Nick’s most suspicious qualities. Her tone makes her television viewers—and, thereby, *Gone Girl* readers—susceptible to assuming Nick’s guilt. This susceptibility, however, is key to the suspense of the novel. The question of whether or not Nick killed Amy guides the tension of the entire first part of the novel; that Ellen Abbott takes a firm stance proclaiming his suspiciousness remediates the conventions that, if a wife is missing, her husband did it.

Whereas the puffy-hair woman was desperate to spin Ma’s tale into a story of triumph, Ellen Abbott’s aim is to find him guilty in the court of public opinion. The damning effect of her coverage is not lost on Nick, however. As the days pass without Amy’s reappearance, Nick turns to another television personality, Sharon Schreiber, to take control of the narrative and proclaim his innocence. Sharon is the anti-Ellen Abbott: “the top-rated (ages 30-55) networks (broader reach than cable) newswoman... working today” (311). This interview provides Nick with the outlet to appeal for his wife’s return, but it also gives Flynn the space to meditate on the very ideas that frame the novel:

*But here’s the thing, Sharon: I did not kill Amy. I would never hurt her. I think what’s happening here is what I’ve been calling [a chuckle] in my mind the Ellen Abbott effect. This embarrassing, irresponsible brand of journalism. We are so used to seeing these murders of women packaged as entertainment, which is disgusting,*

*and in these shows, who is guilty? It's always the husband. So I think the public and, to an extent, even the police have been hammered into believing that's always the case. From the beginning, it was practically assumed I had killed my wife—because that's the story we are told time after time—and that's wrong, that's morally wrong. I did not kill my wife. I want her to come home. (333)*

Here Flynn explicitly articulates everything readers of *Gone Girl* already know: Nick is probably guilty. However, there is the added layer of critique to this passage that complicates the novel's interactions with its real-life mass media influence. Nick can reprimand cable news—and Ellen Abbott, specifically—for recapitulating violent narratives to the point of total predictability, but this metanarrative does not undo the fact that *Gone Girl* is, above all, another version of the same old narrative. Nick and Amy's perspectives make the novel interesting, but more self-consciousness of gender does little to rewrite the gendered conventions of these narratives. It does, in highlighting their constructions, however, sensitize us to them.

This thesis charts how the unconventional narrative perspective of these novels exposes the ideological expectations of gendered violence and reveals the scripted constructions of these stories and their key figures. Chapter one explores how, in *Room*, Ma's intelligibility as a mother comes from Jack's perspective, though her intelligibility as victim is less clear. To Jack, Ma is not, and has never been, a victim, because he knows nothing but Room. The temporal dislocation

that results from Jack's limited perspective highlights the conventions that structure his post-captivity life, as his ignorance of his own captivity ultimately reflects his innocence. Chapter two shows how, in *Gone Girl*, Nick and Amy assert a complete awareness of the ways in which the media frames narratives of violence. Nick knows he seems guilty based on the media, if nothing else, and Amy's diary corroborates this narrative by revealing the growing volatility of her husband. What distinguishes *Gone Girl*, however, is the plot twist conventional to literary thriller; Amy's diary, Flynn reveals, is a work of fiction constructed by Amy to draw the attention of the public. Amy exhibits a kind of mastery over these narratives and their operations, all to her own advantage. She does not eschew conventions; she *is* the convention. Finally, a brief coda turns to this year's *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, a sitcom created by Tina Fey. In the show, Kimmy Schmidt (Ellie Kemper) adjusts to life in New York City after fifteen years in an Indiana bunker, where she was held captive by a doomsday preacher. Kimmy's blissful naivety upon her return to the outside world contrasts the sensationalized news coverage her reappearance sparks. In the progression from true-crime media depictions to fictional retellings of violence, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* shows an interesting shift to comedy as a narrative tactic to expose media constructions of victimhood.

## Chapter 1

### Girl, Gone: Complicating Captivity in *Room*

Shortly before the 2010 release of Emma Donoghue's novel *Room*, California authorities discovered a young woman, Jaycee Dugard, and her two daughters imprisoned in a backyard toolshed. During her eighteen year captivity, Dugard's captor, a registered sex offender, raped her repeatedly and, when she became pregnant, forced her to give birth in isolation. The narrative arc that Dugard's story follows—adolescent abduction, imprisonment, childbirth, and eventual escape—is familiar enough that it provides the structure for many texts in a broader discourse of captivity, from the mass media to contemporary literature. This conventional narrative arc is foundational to *Room*, as well, because it highlights the ways that *Room* challenges structures of captivity. The novel follows a woman known only as Ma and her five-year-old son, Jack, as they are held captive by Old Nick, Ma's abductor. The timing of Dugard's reappearance and the release of *Room* caused immediate media comparisons between the “uncannily similar” narratives; after Dugard had published a memoir of her captivity, *A Stolen Life*, the two texts even drew side-by-side close-readings (Franklin).

Captivity memoirs published in the last decade establish the structural and ideological conventions of contemporary captivity. Elizabeth Smart, abducted and held captive by a former employee of her parents, wrote *My Story* about her nine-month ordeal, published in 2013. Amanda Berry and Gina DeJesus, two women

held captive in Cleveland by Ariel Castro for more than a decade, are releasing a joint memoir in 2015; the other woman kept with them, Michelle Knight, published her own memoir, *Finding Me: A Decade of Darkness, a Life Reclaimed: A Memoir of the Cleveland Kidnappings*, in 2014; Sabine Dardenne and Natascha Kampusch both wrote of their captivities—Dardenne in Belgium, Kampusch in Austria—in their respective memoirs, *I Choose to Live* (2005) and *3,096 Days* (2010). The genre is so well established that even the fictional Amy Dunne, of Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl*, writes an account of her captivity under her ex-lover Desi Collings. Although the experiences described by each survivor vary, their memoirs are linked by a first-person point-of-view. Narrating from this perspective allows the women to “[claim] a voice for the future” in what Elaine Showalter calls a “therapeutic ritual of closure” (Showalter). It is a way for women to be the agents of their own captivities, controlling the narrative when the situation was uncontrollable. Yet Donaghue’s novel avoids one of the central narrative conventions of *A Stolen Life*—that of a survivor narrating her own story in an effort to reclaim her voice.

Instead, Donaghue narrates *Room* through Jack’s perspective, keeping Ma necessarily distant from the reader and thereby creating a different narrative arc than the typical post-captivity empowerment. This move, however, is key to the strangeness of *Room*, as Ma’s actions during and after captivity have less to do with her own empowerment than with the preservation of Jack’s innocence. Because he was born in captivity, after Ma was impregnated by her captor, Jack has no concept of the outside world; in fact, Ma has taught Jack that the woodshed



where they are held is floating through Outer Space.<sup>3</sup> Although the two are confined together, Jack experiences this small space much differently than Ma. His limited knowledge of the complex workings of the world when he is captive and freed simultaneously reaffirms and disrupts the conventions of captivity. However, the less recognizable this narrative is readers, the more powerful Ma seems, as her strength is rendered *by* the unintelligibility of Jack's narrative. Jack does not have the perspective capability to view Ma as anything but his mother. He is, in a sense, free from the conventions that shape Ma's identity as a captive; his ignorance reveals the narrative constructions of captivity when he experiences them anew, once he and Ma escape Room. Jack's perspective, then, allows Donaghue to narrate Ma's kidnapping and captivity without the context of true-crime conventions.

**“I’m confused already. I’m one hundred percent confused.”**

### **The alienation of Jack's narration**

Rooted in the stories of “a brutal, murderous band of savages who seize a frail, vulnerable white woman,” the captivity narrative has remained a literary fixture since its initial appearance in the seventeenth century (Stimpson). The first American bestseller was, after all, Mary Rowlandson's *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, an autobiographical account

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout *Room*, Jack refers to Outer Space, Wardrobe, Plant, Bed, and Room, among others, with capitalizations. He both genders—by referring to Plant, for example, with feminine pronouns—and personifies these objects.

of Rowlandson's capture and captivity during King Philip's War in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The earliest captivity narratives, like Rowlandson's, focused on the racial anxieties and tensions between white settlers and indigenous peoples. The contemporary version found in *Room* and the high-profile real-life cases that gain media traction, by contract, emphasize the sexual violence between captor and hostage above all. Yet the accounts are not entirely dissimilar, as one of the primary features of the captivity narrative is a complete lack of control felt by the hostage and her attempts to regain it. In discussions of such captivity memoirs, *Room* frequently makes an appearance because of its real-world parallels and its timeliness to other major hostage escapes. *Room* is based on the horrifying case of Elisabeth Fritzl, a young Austrian woman held captive and repeatedly assaulted and impregnated by her father for 24 years.

Yet the intelligibility of Jack's narration to readers is predicated by pre-existing narrative conventions, found so often in the contemporary captivity memoirs. Though "[we] feel guilty about being attracted to these stories, almost complicit in the exploitation of women," there is undoubtedly a market and desire to read about what these women lived through—and survived. Central to what makes these stories so appealing is that the women overcame. They overcame suffering, they overcame abuse, and they overcame feelings of hopelessness. This survival has ideological value to the narratives that emerge from captivity, however, as it is contingent on having survived sexual abuse, in particular. These genuine stories, then, come to operate in the regressive equation of women with purity. Showalter argues that part of the appeal of captivity trauma memoirs is that "[rather] than focusing obsessively on women's helplessness, sexual

vulnerability and terror, these books are testaments to women's courage, resourcefulness, and strength." Although Ma does not narrate, her strength still shows through in *Room*. It is Jack, however, whose narration renders Ma powerful.

Discussing Jack in an interview, Donoghue claims describes him as a sort of alien, a "wide-eyed child emerging into the world like a Martian coming to Earth" (Crown). This perspective, then, alienates the conventions of the captivity narrative because to Jack, this is not captivity at all. He has no longing to return to the outside world since as far as he knows it does not exist. His deep love for Ma, Room, and the few objects in it reflects an attachment that is quintessentially childlike in both its innocence and also its stubborn solipsism. Ma, however, is neither resigned to her life in Room nor content with it. Old Nick's escalating violence, including cruelly reminding Ma not to "forget where you got [Jack]" and shutting off the power in Room, sparks an urgent anxiety in Ma to explain to Jack the circumstances of their life in Room and escape: "I couldn't tell you before, because you were too small to understand, so I guess I was sort of lying to you then. But now you're five, I think you can understand" (85). But Jack cannot understand, and this misunderstandings help structure the entire novel.

Perhaps the greatest complication Jack's perspective offers a reader of *Room* is his lack of any concept of the outside world. His narration does not and cannot reflect what would happen if he and Ma were to escape and reenter society. Showalter argues that Jack's humanization of these inanimate objects is a reflection of how he and Ma "have made iconic and comforting" the environment

in Room, all with the “power of imagination” (Showalter). But this power of imagination misleads Jack and contributes to his inability to distinguish real from unreal from surreal. Ma is the only person Jack considers real; his sheltered life inside Room has convinced him that “[women] aren’t real like Ma is, and girls and boys not either. Men aren’t real except Old Nick, and I’m not actually sure if he’s real for real. Maybe half?” (Donoghue 18). Jack’s confusion shapes the alienation to conventions that underlies the novel.

Specifically, Jack’s confusion is focused on his relationship with Ma, and why she wants to “be outside” with Jack (85). In the author’s note to *A Stolen Life*, Jaycee Dugard describes her own confusion in captivity: “This book might be confusing to some. But keep in mind throughout my book that this was a very confusing world I lived in” (Dugard iix). Although memoirs have a particular set of conventions, even the texts sometimes strain against them. Dugard’s outright admission that her experience, and thus her memoir, might seem disorienting highlights the messiness of memory and testimony. Yet this fact does not necessarily position Dugard as an unreliable narrator; rather, her confusion serves as a critical narrative tactic, because she is less interested in forming a perfect, neat story than staying true to what happened. Here Dugard explicitly does what Donoghue achieves through Jack’s perspective by getting readers to see this experience beyond their ossified categories for it. Dugard, then, is able to refuse the ideological conventions of captivity. By admitting her confusion and forcing readers to experience it with her, she exposes the tension of navigating such a messy narrative, rejecting a role as victim .

Jack's own confusion about his narrative is reflected in some of his key beliefs, such as his belief that Room is self-sufficient object in Outer Space. When he and Ma watch TV together, he assumes that one would need to physically enter the television set to travel somewhere else. For example, Ma has a reliance on "killers"—pain medication—to deal with her rotting teeth, after so many years without dental care. When Jack sees a commercial for Ma's "killers" on TV, then, he assumes that Old Nick "must go in TV. When he's not here, in the daytime, you know? He actually goes in TV. That's where he got our killers in a store and brung them there" (Donague 57-58). Jack's belief, though disorienting for him, is an example of Ma's desire to shield Jack from the pain he would experience if he knew what life was like outside of Room. By allowing—and even encouraging—Jack to believe that the only way to experience the world is (literally) through the television, and that there is no life outside of Room, Ma preserves the safety she has created in the woodshed to protect Jack.

The confusion that Jack feels, then, is a direct result of Ma's attempts at raising him with some sense of normalcy. She creates Jack's lack of understanding, of course, yet she does not keep her abuse and their captivity at the hands of Old Nick from Jack to trick him, but rather to protect him from the man who has caused her incredible pain. Despite Jack's ignorance, however, the conventions of the captivity narrative are so familiar that readers understand what is happening even when Jack does not. Although Ma fears retribution should she try to escape again, she still attempts to find help for Jack and herself. One of

Ma's primary areas of focus is Skylight, the sole window in all of Room, reinforced with a piece of mesh:

There's light flashing at me, it stabs my eyes. I look out of Duvet but squinting. Ma standing beside Lamp and everything bright, then snap and dark again. Light again, she makes it last three seconds then dark, then light for just a second. Ma's staring up at Skylight. Dark again. She does this in the night, I think it helps her get to sleep again. (27)

Although it is not clear to Jack, readers infer Ma's real intentions—to signal outsiders for help. The subtleties of Ma's escape attempts, and her refusal to tell Jack what her motivations are, provide a clearer insight into Ma's character by forcing us to see these conventions anew, through Jack's naivety. Jack's gaze undoubtedly glorifies Ma as he loves her more than anything, but Ma's constant efforts to break free reflect the strength and courage Showalter admires in survivors of captivity. To Jack, these are rituals and games. But to the reader, Ma's routine is intelligible as attempts at escape. It means nothing to Jack that he and Ma are unable to do *Scream* on Saturdays and Sundays, but this tiny detail fleshes out some of Ma's situation. Old Nick, having the weekends off, means it is likely that he has something to keep him busy throughout the week, and that Ma cannot attempt to draw attention to Room for fear of him finding out. The stakes are high for Ma and Jack, but Jack cannot comprehend them.

One of the most upsetting details of Ma's captivity that Jack cannot understand is Old Nick's repeated sexual assaults of Ma. The only aspect of her

life that Ma can control is to keep Jack hidden from Old Nick's view. Whenever Old Nick comes to Room to assault Ma, Jack stays in Wardrobe, his make-shift bedroom. While he has "seen Old Nick through the slat some nights" he has "never [seen] all of him"—just as his mother intends. This control allows Ma to shield Jack from the abuse. Still, Jack listens from the Wardrobe on the nights Old Nick comes into Room: "When Old Nick creaks Bed, I listen and count fives on my fingers, tonight it's 217 creaks. I always have to count till he makes that gaspy sound and stops" (37). When Jack hears the bed creak, the reader understands what is really happening in a way that he cannot. Ma goes to desperate measures in order to ensure the safety of Jack and herself, including an instance where she "smashed the toilet lid down on [Old Nick's] head" in an effort to escape, before Jack was born. Ma ended up under his physical and mental control again, however, as he threatened to leave her to "get hungrier and hungrier till [she] died" if she "ever tried a stunt like that again" (96). Although Ma's ultimate intention was to escape Old Nick's captivity, she could not afford to, as her life—and, later on, Jack's—depended on it.

### **"The Great Escape"**

#### **The perpetual present of Jack's perspective**

Readers do not know what it is like to have been held captive; Donaghue does not know, either. But the glimpses that captivity memoirs offer, in combination with cable news speculation and true-crime media representations,

provide some of the missing pieces for Donaghue to then make fit. Jack's narration, for example, disorients the reader by shifting the usual temporal conventions of captivity. The novel begins on Jack's birthday: "Today I'm five. I was four last night going to sleep in Wardrobe, but when I wake up in Bed in the dark I'm changed to five, abracadabra. Before that I was three, then two, then one, then zero" (3). That Jack's whole life is, and has always been, Room, from the moment he "slid out onto the rug" (4), complicates one of the central narrative devices of narratives of captivity—its chronology. There is no pre-captivity past for Jack, but rather a perpetual present. Jack does not understand that he and Ma are captives or that there is a world outside of Room, and this limited perspective challenges readers as they navigate the nuanced physical and mental space that Jack and Ma occupy. Readers are attuned to the conventions that make intelligible this captivity—and, particularly, the acts of violence that Ma endures—while Jack remains oblivious.

What readers know about Ma is based on their own interpretations of her explanations and behaviors, and their familiarity with the captivity narrative; Jack cannot fathom this information, because he does not have the skills or experience to understand the way in which he and Ma ultimately are figures in the captivity discourse. Susan Lanser, in "Feminist Poetics of Narrative Voice," describes a relationship between voice and authority:

Discursive authority—by which I mean here the intellectual credibility, ideological validity, and aesthetic value claimed by or conferred upon a work, author, narrator, character, or textual



practice—is produced interactively; it must therefore be characterized with respect to specific receiving communities.

(Lanser)

Jack's perspective alone, however, lacks discursive authority. The receiving community—the readers of *Room*—understand the conventions of captivity because they have encountered it again and again in mass media representations. What Jack offers as a narrator has less to do with his credibility than with his naivety. For example, Jack never views Ma as a victim, because the entire concept of victimization is foreign to him. What he does not know makes clearer the conventions that readers and viewers assume to know. That he is a child undoubtedly effects Jack's perspective. But it is the combination of Jack's childhood *with* his captivity that produces his perspective, one that is free from conventions in a way Jack cannot understand. This is perhaps most evident in the ways that Jack's perspective dislocates the temporality of captivity, as Jack is only able to highlight what life is like during captivity; the details of Ma's abduction and captivity before him was born are inaccessible to Jack.

By contrast, recent captivity memoirs tend to follow a specific structure. The works of Jaycee Dugard, Elizabeth Smart, and Michelle Knight, for instance, all begin with a direct reference to their captivities. Dugard's begins: "Let's get one thing straight! My name is Jaycee Lee Dugard. I was kidnapped by a stranger at age eleven" (Dugard 1). By asserting her own name, Dugard is reclaiming her identity and setting the story "straight," positioning her memoir as the one true narrative despite the proliferation of her story. In all these accounts, a pre-

abduction childhood memory follows the introduction. Knight's takes place in "the inside of that brown station wagon—the grimy floor mats and the stink of rotten apples" (Knight). Then, finally, there is an account of the day of the abduction, like in Smart's *My Story*: "Brian David Mitchell began his journey to my bedroom many years before he actually found himself standing beside my bed in the middle of the night" (Smart). The violence that Dugard, Smart, and Knight faced as captives forced them to transform from child to survivor. This transformation figures into the ideological construction of lost innocence in these narratives.

When a woman who survives her captivity strays from these conventions, then, she is vilified as though she were complicit in her own violence. In a sense, she becomes the exception to the rule. Kampusch, the Austrian woman who wrote *3,096 Days* about her eight-year captivity, faced "disgust and confusion" from the "astonished, infatuated public" after she expressed mourning for her captor, who committed suicide once she escaped. The backlash turned even more severe "when she refused to play the role of a victim—a weak girl in need of help—and instead tried to explain to interviewers the nuances of their relationship." Because Kampusch rejected the conventions expected of her as a victim of captivity, she was criticized by the media and "dismissed... as suffering from Stockholm Syndrome, a label intended, she says, to deny her the ability to judge her own experiences" (Ronson). Even in her memoir, Kampusch's efforts to reclaim her voice and agency after years of captivity are met with opposition because of her hesitation to discuss the sexual abuse she faced. The ideological investment in the

purity of the abducted captive reveals the intricate ties between captivity narratives and loss of innocence. If the narrative arc of captivity is abduction, imprisonment, and release, then the ideological arc that mirrors it is innocence, violence, and redemption.

*Room*, however, is a story not of lost innocence, but preserved innocence. Ma's efforts to keep Jack hidden—literally in Wardrobe, and figuratively from Old Nick's control—are meant to protect him from the violence of Room. Ma's own loss of innocence is not immediately visible. In fact, her entire abduction is kept hidden from Jack and the readers until her need to escape is so strong that she decides to tell Jack. Ma was nineteen when Old Nick "stole" her while she "was crossing a parking lot to get to the college library" (Donaghue 92). Old Nick forced Ma to "take some bad medicine" to knock her out and subsequently locked her in Room (94). This information—what would be the recollection of the taking in a captivity memoir—filters into the text from Ma's own dialogue. Because it is remediated through Jack's perspective, however, the recognizable narrative arc becomes dislocated.

Jack's inability to fathom the stakes of his captivity becomes especially clear when Ma decides to attempt escape, once and for all. Referring to it as their "Great Escape," Ma comes up with the plan to have Jack play dead so that Old Nick takes him outside to dispose of his body, at which point he'll run for help and give the first person he sees a note Ma has written. Jack understands the sequence as: "*Dead, Truck, Run, Somebody*—no, *Wriggle Out*, then *Jump, Run, Somebody, Note, Blowtorch*. I forgot *Police* before *Blowtorch*, it's too

complicated, I'm going to mess it all up and Old Nick will bury me for real and Ma will be waiting always" (134). The rapid stream-of-consciousness of Jack's thoughts exemplifies the disorientation and confusion that he feels.

It is ultimately this dislocation of narrative and temporal perspective that sets *Room* apart in the captivity narrative tradition. Jack's point-of-view is necessarily limited, but these limits reveals the ideological constructions of captivity. It is unfair to claim *Room* as a superior account of captivity than the memoirs that have preceded and succeeded it, but the novel occupies a particular role in its exposure of mass media constructions. By shifting the temporality, Donaghue disrupts the standard narrative structure of captivity, and mimics the confusion of survivors, while also revealing, through Jack's perspective, the implicit and explicit constructions of gendered violence that the mass media creates.

## Chapter 2

### Soon to Be Presumed Dead: Narrative Mastery in *Gone Girl*

On the afternoon of Nick and Amy Dunne's fifth wedding anniversary, Nick returns home to find the front door "wide-gaping-ominous open," the living room in shambles, and Amy gone (Flynn 23). So begins Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, a 2012 novel sometimes situated in the literary subgenre of "chick noir," a category defined by "toxic marriage thrillers" (Stock). A self-professed "true-crime addict," Flynn has stated that the main inspiration for *Gone Girl* was the idea that "[when a] wife goes missing[,] you assume that the husband did it" (Lee). This has, after all, become the expected outcome to the narrative of the missing, pretty wife. Even Nick recognizes this fact when he repeatedly thinks to himself, "It's always the husband" (Flynn 43). The missing wife narrative in particular relies on idealized representations of the victim so as to vilify the suspected perpetrator—her husband. This dynamic draws on the historical social norm that dictates that, from the "initial family upbringing through her subsequent development, the social role assigned to the woman is that of *servicing* an image, authoritative and central, of man: a woman is first and foremost a daughter/a mother/a wife" (Felman 7). In the narratives that emerge in true-crime media, these conventions are reconstructed to produce an ideological link between femininity and victimhood.

Flynn structures *Gone Girl*, then, around—and with a clear self-awareness of—these narratives and ideologies. This self-awareness applies to both Nick and

Amy, as well, as they are so attuned to the conventions of the missing wife that it structures reader perceptions of the narrative. Nick narrates the novel beginning on the day of Amy's disappearance and proceeding forward, while chapters from Amy's diary start when she and Nick first meet and move toward the date of her disappearance. Amy's diary, then, becomes a narrative device to create perspective without revealing her whereabouts, keeping with the suspense of the novel. However, the big twist in *Gone Girl*—that Amy has faked her own disappearance—means that her entire diary was a work of fiction. Thus Flynn exposes media conventions and ideological expectations of victimhood through Amy's authorship of the very conventions. This does not mean that Flynn provides the feminist alternative to the missing wife narrative, however. Instead, Flynn reveals, but does not reform, true-crime narrative conventions.

**“I catch him looking at me with those watchful eyes, the eyes of an insect, pure calculation, and I think: *This man might kill me.*”**

#### **Nick and Amy's narrative self-awareness**

The morning of Nick and Amy Dunne's fifth anniversary—the day of Amy's disappearance—Amy is “triumphant” and “wifely” as she makes crepes in honor of the special occasion. These initial depictions of Amy are filtered through Nick's perspective: Amy, “humming something melancholy and familiar” as she cooks; Amy, who greets her husband with: “Well, hello, handsome.” Yet this seemingly innocuous behavior fills Nick with “[bile] and dread” (7). From the

outset Flynn frames Nick as someone potentially suspicious, right down to his “twitchy” demeanor (16). Foundational to understanding Nick and Amy’s relationship is the power tensions between the two. Where Amy is wealthy, New York City born and raised, Nick is a working-class Midwestern boy. Amy’s status, then, has an emasculating effect on Nick. A particular point of contention for Nick is Amy’s inevitable “elaborate treasure hunt, with each clue leading to the hiding place of the next clue until [he] reached the end, and [his] present.” Nick’s inability to “[figure] out the clues” (18) led to “a genuine tradition forming” on their anniversary, with “Amy always going overboard, [and Nick] never, ever worthy of the effort” (20). The treasure hunt, however, does not only exemplify the marital tensions between the couple, but also the ramifications of the power imbalance in their relationship:

It was what [Amy’s] dad always did for her mom on their anniversary, and don’t think I don’t see the gender roles here, that I don’t get the hint. But I did not grow up in Amy’s household, I grew up in mine, and the last present I remember my dad giving my mom was an iron, set on the kitchen counter, no wrapping paper. (18)

Through this direct reference to gender conventions and Nick’s unease over his emasculation in the marriage, Flynn shapes the reader expectations of Nick’s behavior. The frequent antagonist to the missing wife is her husband, and Nick occupies a specific form of this role: the frustrated, emasculated doofus.

The two greatest causals of Nick's masculine anxieties are his finances and his father. After borrowing eighty thousand dollars from Amy to open a bar with his sister, Nick insists that he will repay her back, "with interest," because "he would not be a man who borrowed from his wife." The motivation for this is the image of Nick's father "twisting his lips at the very idea" and "his most damning phrase" about how "there are all kinds of men," and that Nick is the "wrong kind" (7). Nick is tested, then, by both his financial reliance on Amy and his inability to be the "right" kind of man his father wanted him to be. Nick's constant fluctuation between typically masculine identities—and his frustrations at not filling out these roles naturally—complicates the power dynamic of the narrative of the murdered. While the missing wife narrative functions ideologically on assumptions of male violence and female victimization, Nick does not appear to be an inherently violent husband. His hatred toward his "wounded, vengeful" father who "just didn't like women" seems evidence enough (60). Yet even though Nick understands that his father "did do harm" to the family, he still recognizes his "father's rage rise up in [himself] in the ugliest way" when surrounded by "angry or tearful women" (61). That he acknowledges this misogynistic streak does little to remediate it.

So unsure is Nick of his conventional gender role that when Nick's neighbor summons him home from the bar because his front door is open and Amy's cat is loose, Nick automatically begins "enacting Concerned Husband" (23). Rather than reacting genuinely, he assumes a specific identity in order to act appropriately as a husband who returns to an empty house, "a pair of good sharp



scissors” on the floor, and his wife nowhere to be found (24). Right away, Nick appears entrapped by the workings of crime narratives. Every time Nick mentions a form of the phrase “signs of a struggle,” the words are italicized. He even situates himself in a pretend TV show while Detectives Boney and Gilpin question him. Nick imagines he is in “the same room [he’d] seen surfing through late-night cable for the past two years, and the two cops—wary, intense—acted like the stars. Totally fake.” This is the “*Missing Wife game!*” to Nick, and they are all “pretend people” (42). That he is “giddy” at reenacting a scene so familiar from TV is a testament to the pervasiveness of these narratives. They are constructed to the point of exhaustion. Flynn uses the novel as form, capable of containing multiple structures, to revivify them. While discussing the characters in *Gone Girl*, Flynn describes a type of skill that Nick and Amy have in relation to how the media operates, saying that it is “hard for anyone to claim that they don’t know how these things work anymore because we’re so immersed in it, on the internet and TV and movies” (Lee). This true-crime media hyper-literacy is a driving force throughout the novel, because Flynn relies on a readership who recognizes the conventions of the murdered wife.

This is particularly true when Nick addresses the reader after a woman named Andie appears in his doorway the night of Amy’s disappearance:

I have a mistress. Now is the part where I have to tell you I have a mistress and you stop liking me. If you liked me to begin with. I have a pretty, young, very young mistress, and her name is Andie. I know. It’s bad. (142)

Nick knows full well that these categories conform to narrative conventions of violence. His wife is missing, his alibi is shaky, and he has a young girlfriend; none of these points help Nick. The revelation of his affair causes his role to shift, as he is no longer just the aloof husband with imperiled masculinity, but a liar with a “canine-loyal lust” toward his twenty-three year old former student (143). He is at once emasculated by Amy yet hyper-masculine because of Andie, fusing two contradictory gender conventions that call his narrative role into question: is Nick the sad-sack with a grudge, or the macho stud with an “irresponsibly, disastrously young” mistress (144)? Either way, Nick is suspicious.

Yet Nick’s perspective only provides half of the narrative. Alternating chapters from Nick’s point-of-view are flashbacks in the form of Amy’s diary entries. The chapters begin first when the two first met and continue chronologically until her disappearance. Amy’s initial glee over a chance encounter with Nick, as well as her “embarrassment over how happy [she is], like some Technicolor comic of a teenage girl talking on the phone,” contrasts Nick’s dark mood on their five-year anniversary (8). These shifts in temporality force the reader to wonder how it is possible that what started out so promising ends with Amy gone. Amy’s actions once she and Nick marry seem to push against the Amy’s original marital philosophy, as she jokes that she will “forfeit [her] Young Independent Feminist card” for marriage (38). From Nick’s perspective, though, Amy is “abrasive enough to want to hurt,” as though “the old Amy, the girl of the big laugh and the easy ways, literally shed herself, a pile of skin and soul on the floor, and out stepped this new, brittle, bitter Amy” (49). Amy’s diary entries,

however, reveal her devotion as a wife amidst a deeper struggle, at once implicating Nick and corroborating the ideological expectations of the missing wife narrative.

In the entries leading up to Amy's disappearance, Nick becomes more and more distant, with Amy trying to "take [her] husband out of [his] dark shadowy thoughts and shine some cheerful golden light on him," even though she worries he will be "dropping" her as they create a new life together in Nick's hometown of North Carthage, Missouri (141). Perhaps the most shocking revelation of Nick's potential for violence is Amy's confession that Nick "uses [her] for sex when he needs to." This escalation to sexual violence makes the idea that Nick could be capable of killing his wife seem more and more possible. Despite it all, Amy reveals in her diary that she will try anything to save her marriage—even having a baby. This provides a stark contrast to Nick's insistence that "Amy had decided she didn't want kids, and she'd reiterated this fact several times," even though he wanted desperately to be a father (91). The sacrifice Amy would make in order to please her husband, then, was the greatest she could give him. But when Amy suggests this to Nick, "[his] eyes go dark, canine," and he admits that he "will snap" with the pressure of a child (187). Amy, then, assumes the ideological expectations of femininity while her husband, frustrated and resentful, acts emotionless and careless toward Amy's disappearance, uninterested in saving her. Just as true-crime television programs categorize victims and perpetrators to fit certain ideological expectations, Flynn manipulates Amy and Nick into similar roles. The entire first part of *Gone Girl* exists in order to refamiliarize readers

with the true-crime narrative of a missing wife and her unfaithful husband. By positing Nick and Amy as such self-conscious narrators, Flynn exposes the constructions of true-crime media narratives that assumed Nick's suspiciousness.

The supposed clincher to Nick's guilt is how, as the days lead up to Amy's disappearance, Amy expresses fear of her "angry" and "unstable" husband (197). Amy, unexpectedly pregnant, feels newly alive but has yet to tell Nick the news when he shoves her so hard that she hits her head and is unable to "see for three seconds" (195). It is this moment that sparks a new fear in Amy at "the way [Nick] looks at [her]," with "watchful eyes, the eyes of an insect, pure calculation." It makes her "think: *This man might kill me*" (201), and she decides that she "just would feel safer with a gun" (196). If the reader needed any more proof that Nick killed, or at the very least harmed, his wife, Amy's diary all but provides it. Corroborating the true-crime narrative—a fearful wife goes missing, chances are her husband did it—the end of part one marks a pivotal moment, as the detectives working the case become even more suspicious of Nick after Amy's best friend reveals Amy's pregnancy, and that Nick didn't want kids. Shocked by this news, Nick tells himself to "act correctly" when the detectives confirm Amy's pregnancy through her doctor, showing a keen awareness to the type of behavior expected of "a man when he hears this news" (202). Once again, Nick enacts an ideological role so as not to further implicate himself in a system that has already deemed him guilty.

Yet after meticulously recreating the missing wife narrative, Flynn ends part one with Nick making a shocking discovery, one left unseen to the reader except for Nick's subsequent panic: *Nonononono* (215).

**“Let me tell you a story, a *true* story, so you can begin to understand.”**

### **Authoring violence in Amy's diary**

Amy's first chapter in part two of *Gone Girl* begins: “I'm so much happier now that I'm dead. Technically, missing. Soon to be presumed dead. But as shorthand, we'll say dead.” At this pivotal moment in the novel Flynn undoes the entire missing wife narrative that sustained part one, as it is Amy who, over the course of a year, masterminded her own disappearance (219). The revelation that Amy is alive resolves any residual doubts that Nick was the one responsible for her harm. This causes a shift in the novel, then, from the conventions of one pervasive narrative to another: the missing wife to the “psycho bitch” (271). The version of Amy in part one is the ultimate angel, adhering to intelligible gender conventions as the desperate, pregnant wife in a terrifying marriage. Yet this Amy is just an illusion—Diary Amy, a “work of fiction” (220). By writing herself as a loyal wife and nervous but excited mother-to-be, Amy constructs a sympathetic, recognizable character who draws the attention of the news media. Because of her perception, Amy knows exactly what to do so that no one suspects her, following cues to instill mistrust in her husband and to build sympathy for herself:

I wrote her very carefully, Diary Amy. She is designed to appeal to the cops, to appeal to the public should portions be released. They have to read this diary like it's some sort of Gothic tragedy. A wonderful, good-hearted woman—*whole life ahead of her, everything going for her*, whatever else they say about women who died—chooses the wrong mate and *pays the ultimate price*. They have to like me. Her. (238)

Amy is so attuned to missing wife narratives that she is able to feed directly into it through her diary, authoring herself as the victim. The media skill that Flynn previously expressed comes to full fruition with Amy. She does not subvert the ideological conventions of victimhood; she *is* the convention. Authoring herself as a mother-to-be in an abusive relationship is key to the media firestorm that Amy's disappearance sparks. She will go to huge lengths to punish her husband for cheating on her—even faking a pregnancy, which Amy reveals she made up for the diary, because it would cause even more outrage, backlash, and punishment against Nick. That is, in essence, Amy's motive for staging her disappearance: to punish Nick for being a bad husband, for cheating on her with Andie, and for loving her though she was “pretending to be someone else” and then hating the “real” Amy (224). Amy derides the “Cool Girl,” the type of woman she was pretending to be when she met Nick:

Men always say that as *the* defining characteristic, don't they?  
*She's a cool girl*. Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping,

who plays video game, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she's hosting the world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintain a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. *Go ahead, shit on me, I don't mind, I'm the Cool Girl.* (222)

Essentially, a "Cool Girl" is "the girl a man like Nick wants," someone who will do everything and anything for the men in their lives, but look hot doing it. The "Cool Girl" is a persona that Amy constructed for herself when she met Nick, and lived with for years, but eventually shed "because it wasn't real, it wasn't [her]" (224). The "Cool Girl" monologue is perhaps the most explicit interaction with the ideological categories of femininity within the novel, and by far the most popular portion excerpted in the media. It is a "venomous passage about what women will do to please men, and what men expect of women," with particular emphasis on the last part (Dobbins). Amy was not a Cool Girl because she wanted to be, but because that is who *Nick* wanted her to be.

The revelation that Amy herself authored herself into a constructed ideology of victimhood complicates the feminist rhetoric in the "Cool Girl" critique. Yes, Amy performs a valid critique of the gender roles she felt confined to and challenges sexist notions of womanhood that reduce her to nothing more than a cool wife. In order to do so, however, Amy must be cold, calculated, and manipulative. Following its release, *Gone Girl* received a slew of accusations of

misogyny regarding Amy's portrayal. When the film adaptation, directed by David Fincher and adapted by Flynn, hit theaters in October 2014, similar accusations appeared online, with some reviewers finding the ultimate takeaway from the film to be "the notion that 'bitches be crazy'" (Etkin). The depictions of abuse—sexual, physical, and emotional—by Nick are pure creations of Amy in order to make Nick appear more suspicious, which makes her, in a sense, "a men's rights activist's perfect affirmation" (Willmore). Amy confirms the worst stereotypes of women—specifically that they lie about assault.

Perhaps the most controversial scene is when Amy, held captive by her former lover Desi Collins, seduces and drugs him, using "a piece of old twine and an empty wine bottle" in order to make it appear as though he raped her. Flynn justifies her usage of "narrative shocks" as a pushback against the idea that feminism is "really only girl power, and you-go-girl, and empower yourself," and that it is "time to acknowledge the ugly side" of women, particularly their capacity to be "pragmatically evil, bad, and selfish" (Burkeman). Amy's entire character, much like her two-faced narration, relies on a series of contradictions: Amy rejects traditional wifehood, yet she cares enough about her husband to make him pay for his infidelity; Amy is sick of the attention she receives because of *Amazing Amy*, but she desperately wants her disappearance to hit the national news. For Amy to truly regain her identity, ditching "Cool Girl" and "Diary Amy," she must manipulate her position in society as a pretty, young, wealthy woman to her advantage. The fact that Amy lies about being raped contributes to a lengthy history of women refusing to come forward with their assaults because



of the fear that people will think they are lying, particularly in the present climate when women like Emma Sulkowicz are struggling to be taken seriously as rape victims. The “crying rape” trope is one “that exists because it’s powerful” (Wiseman). Amy’s lie is yet another way to exert her control, but her power is not equal to empowerment.

Amy’s authorship of the diary is crucial in making her disappearance conform to the conventional constructions of violence. Yet, in the end, Amy returns to North Carthage and to Nick, creating a narrative that frames Amy as “an absolute hero” who saved both herself and Nick with her reappearance (379). That Amy reverts to the very role she tried to escape is complicated by the fact that, this time, Amy is “officially in control of [their] story,” which Amy describes as “symbolic” of both the narrative and the marriage (406). Nick, however, begins “the opening page of [his] own book” while Amy writes a tell-all of her own. Nick’s account, however, allows him to tell the truth where he is “the hero of your story” (407). These two narratives that exist within the world of *Gone Girl*, but are not accessible to its readers, create an ever deeper layer to the narrative, where both the victim and the perpetrator have an outlet to express their versions of the truth.

Yet Amy is able to convince Nick to delete his story by giving him the chance to “unhook, unlatch, debarb, undo everything that Amy did” through the one thing he desired most: fatherhood. After becoming impregnated with sperm that she stole from Nick, Amy is able to instill in Nick the thought that he could “raise [his] son to be a good man” (411). While Amy transforms into another

character—mother—she allows Nick to imagine the life he always wanted, raising a child with a father better than the one he himself had, as though this masculine ideology is one he can finally find solace in. This would let Nick trade in the version of himself that cheats and lies for the life of a father, thereby giving him similar transformative qualities. In effect, both are playing ideological roles when it comes to their relationship—husband and wife, father and mother. Just as the duality of their narrations fused to tell one story, Amy and Nick embody dual, inauthentic versions of themselves.

The main outcome is that, “instead of a single unreliable narrator, Gillian Flynn gives us two: a pair of professional liars whose narrative battle of the sexes proves not that either side is correct but that these two hideous souls deserve each other” (Lang). This time, however, Amy is the one in control, shedding every prior representation of victimization by asserting her power in the novel’s closing paragraphs: “I don’t have anything else to add. I just wanted to make sure I had the last word. I think I’ve earned it” (414). Though this ending is ambiguous, it does guarantee one thing: Amy’s tight grip on the story completely exposes the true-crime narrative of the missing mother-to-be and her adulterous husband. Flynn describes Amy as a “shark” who is always out “looking for blood,” not “a mirror of how people should act” (Willmore). To an extent, this is true: Amy is the epitome of extreme for framing her husband. Yet there is a discomfiting appeal to the “perversity of someone who takes all the tropes that we’ve been bound by, that have been projected on us, and uses them to fuck with people” (Willmore). Amy is certainly a frightening character. But perhaps what is so

frightening about her is that she embodies the conventions of violence with such mastery that the ideologies of femininity and Amy's evil become almost indistinguishable.

## Coda

### **“It’s a Miracle!”: Comedy and Conventionality**

#### **in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt***

Little seems funny about the premise of *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*. The sitcom, created by former *30 Rock* producers Tina Fey and Robert Carlock and released on Netflix in early 2015, follows the eponymous character as she adjusts to life in New York City. The twist? Hoosier Kimmy (Ellie Kemper) has been held captive in a bunker for the past fifteen years, convinced by her abductor that the world has ended—an undoubtedly dark narrative. Worse still, this story has its roots in very real events: the three women from Cleveland, Ohio, kidnapped and held captive by Ariel Castro for more than a decade until their rescue in 2013, offer a clear parallel to Kimmy’s ordeal. A sitcom about the trauma of captivity, then, feels oxymoronic at best, offensive at worst. But *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* does not find its humor at the expense of the women who have endured brutal violence. Instead, the comedy focuses on the sources of that violence, from Kimmy’s idiotic abuser to the fallible justice system to the sensational mass media. This last point in particular is crucial, because the show’s deconstruction of mass media narratives exposes the ideologies that shape victimhood and, as a result, the public’s expectations of Kimmy. Despite her middle school mentality, JanSport backpack and all, Kimmy is not a laughable character. Rather, she is a survivor with undying optimism, a woman whose strength cannot be curbed by those trying to victimize her. Humor, then, becomes a narrative tactic in

*Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* to challenge presuppositions of victimhood. Instead of emphasizing Kimmy's trauma, comedy comes to reveal resilience and, of course, unbreakability.

It is clear from the start of the first episode that something is not quite right in Kimmy's world. Kimmy and two of her fellow captives, Cyndee and Donna Maria, are decorating for Christmas in a dank, gray bunker while the fourth captive, Gretchen, turns a crank in the corner, seemingly to no effect. From their long, modest dresses to their odd way of speaking—"We can't not tell, Sister Kimmy," Gretchen says after Kimmy asks which woman is her Secret Santa, "then 'twouldn't be a secret. Duh!"—there is an undeniable strangeness to this setup. Once the women join hands and circle their makeshift tree, singing, "Apocalypse, apocalypse, we caused it with our dumbness," to the tune of "O Christmas Tree," the strangeness escalates to new, albeit clarifying levels. Establishing Kimmy's life inside the bunker, where she is a member of what resembles a doomsday cult, is critical to the humor of *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*. These first moments of the series (and Kimmy's last of captivity) root the narrative in a recognizable framework of captivity so that, when a SWAT team breaks into the bunker and leads the women outside, the subsequent media circus makes complete sense.

The spectacle of their rescue is key to *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* because the show so heavily relies on a viewership who understands how sensationalized these stories have become. Even the show's theme song, a spoof of viral Auto-Tuned news reports, winks at the constructedness of these stories.

“Unbreakable! They alive, dammit! It’s a miracle!” sings Walter Bankston, witness to Kimmy’s release. “White dudes hold the record for creepy crimes, but females are strong as hell.” The reason this humor resonates is because stories like Kimmy’s are all too common. Both Emma Donoghue’s *Room* and Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* rely on a similar knowledge of their readers. By contrast, however, these novels aim to expose the ideologies of victimhood where *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* leaves it behind.

This background is critical when the series amplifies the media absurdity for comic effect. As Kimmy steps outside for the first time in fifteen years and into the throng of police cars and news vans, she says, amazed, “It’s all still here.” Her amazement that the world has not ended, however, is unmatched by the public’s amazement at the captives’ miraculous survival. A montage of breaking news clips follows Kimmy’s release. “CULT LEADER APPREHENDED WHILE ‘ACTING WEIRD’ AT WALMART,” one such headline reads. “WHITE WOMEN FOUND,” reads another headline, with smaller type below: “Hispanic woman also found.” The humor here is undoubtedly self-aware. In order for jabs about the whiteness of crime coverage or the weirdness of Walmart customers to land, viewers need to be in on the joke. Why is it that the white bodies matter, and Donna Maria’s does not? Because this is precisely how the mass media operates. (To quote Gretchen again: “Duh!”) The discomforting ideological investment in white femininity undergirds narrative constructions of gendered violence; the humor in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* just makes it explicit.

The show's self-awareness is particularly visible during an interview that Kimmy gives with her fellow captives. Matt Lauer cameos as a television personality named Bryant, who is different from Matt Lauer only in name. The two even host the same program: *The Today Show*. In their "first exclusive interview" since their release, the "Indiana Mole Women," as the women have been dubbed by the media, have the opportunity to tell their stories on national television—sort of. Bryant dominates the conversation, interrupting the women as they speak and framing the conversation through a lens that patronizes the women for their captivity. When Cyndee reveals that she was kidnapped after agreeing to "see some baby rabbits" because she "didn't want to be rude," Bryant responds, "I'm always amazed at what women will do because they're afraid of being rude." Though it is an otherwise profound sentiment about the sexist social conditions that women face, the phrase becomes a measure through which Bryant subtly places blame on Cyndee for her own abduction. Similarly, Gretchen "joined this cult willingly" after the abductor "bought some of [her] hair on Craigslist," a fact that Bryant dismisses after a quick: "Wow." Although there is a clear investment in hearing from the Mole Women, this conversation must be done on the terms of the media.

Additionally, there is a specific scriptedness to the ordeal that the interaction with Bryant highlights. When he says, "Ladies, you've been given an amazing second chance at life. People have donated thousands of dollars to the Mole Women fund," Kimmy counters with: "And we are so grateful. But, honestly, we don't love that name—" She is not allowed to finish the thought,

however, as Bryant immediately adds, “So, Mole Women, what happens next? What do you do now?” Though played for comedic effect, Kimmy’s trampled voice provides a metaphor for the routine silencing that women endure after surviving trauma. Kimmy tries to negotiate her newfound fame on her own terms, but the type of control she desires is in direct conflict with the existing ideological constructions of femininity. Gretchen, Donna Maria, and Cyndee all plan to return to Indiana and the normalcy of their lives before captivity, but Kimmy is unsure of her own next step. Kimmy understands full well that her captivity has made her markedly different, which makes New York City—where *everyone* is kind of weird—an appealing backdrop for her new life. In New York City, Kimmy can find some semblance of anonymity, free from the media circus obsessed with her release. The Mole Women each came to the cult in their own way, whether by force or choice, but their differences are glossed over to position the women within ideological frameworks of femininity. As the segment ends, Bryant says, “Okay, when we come back, fall salad mistakes. Plus, one of the Mole Women gets an ambush makeover!” This parody of *The Today Show*, and the meta addition of Matt Lauer as host, exposes the absurdity of these constructions so that viewers are not laughing at Kimmy and the other Mole Women, but uncomfortably with them.

Moments like these, which hit almost too close to home because of their familiarity, abound in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*. The humor of the series comes through the ability to recognize these narratives, however, as it is the key way in which Kimmy’s difference is understood. She is not interested in getting



an ambush makeover and heading back to Indiana, and she is not content to feel victimized. Instead, her optimism, preserved for fifteen years in the bunker, despite the trauma the show implies—Kimmy admits that, “Yes, there was weird sex stuff in the bunker,” and leaves it at that—allows her resilience to shine through. She is savvy and silly, and her earnest delight at all that New York City has to offer is endearing. Perhaps Kimmy is naïve to an exaggerated degree (she shrieks with laughter at the discovery of automatic sinks and hand dryers), but this wide-eyed optimism gives her the necessary tools to exist outside of the constructs of victimhood. Where *Room* and *Gone Girl* navigate how the female characters, Ma and Amy, struggle against the categories of victimhood, Kimmy rejects it altogether. The humor of *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, in its revelations of mass media narrative constructions, allows Kimmy to challenge the ideologies of victimhood not by unlinking these expectations from femininity, but by embracing her girlishness as a strength. Women are, after all, strong as hell.

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