

TLC Showcase

NELL BRYDEN

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Introduction to *Little Wing*

Little *Wing* is the love story of an aspiring musician who falls for an emotionally fragile singer, and follows how they get together as the Twin Towers crumble behind them. Set in August 2001, the novel explores the vagaries of a modern relationship as seen through two twenty-something songwriters pursuing their dreams in downtown New York, and attempts to convey how events change them in different ways, therefore dooming their relationship.

I was living in Greenwich Village on 9/11; the setting is close to my heart. "Write what you know" is the only advice I had when I started. But I am a creative who needs structure. Although I write songs professionally, there are long stretches where I do nothing more artistic than answering emails. Without an album cycle due or a co-writing session in the diary, I'm more likely to be tackling the hundred other things on my list.

So when I decided in 2017 to fulfil a life-long ambition to write a novel, I took a six month writing class at Faber and Faber with Richard Skinner. I began a self-imposed weekly word-count, and forced myself to write, no matter the outcome. I did my best to shut off the internal naysayer while working on my first draft, and by the end of the course I had finished the novel, which punched in at a relatively light 69,000 words.

Then I came up for air and thought: now what? The manuscript felt both precious and impossibly flawed. I couldn't see what was working and what wasn't. Friends and family were too busy to give it a decent read, and I didn't really want to hear what they thought anyway.

Enter TLC. I've worked with three different editors along the way, all giving me overview feedback, and each has been incredibly helpful. At each stage I was able to revise and move the story further along. I came from writing pop songs, which are concise and neat — but that doesn't necessarily work in novel form. My book needed complexity and character development. And while working on subsequent drafts, something else interesting happened: the creative juices started flowing musically and I composed and recorded an album of companion songs, written from the perspective of the two main characters. The songs came from a sense of these characters existing in my consciousness, rather than me trying to write a soundtrack as such.

It's a long process, and I'm still in it. The novel still isn't finished, but I know more or less what's not working, and that's invaluable.

Extract from *Little Wing* by Nell Bryden

The second time I saw Lori I fell in love with her eyebrows. Lovely dark little dancers, arching like caterpillars above her brown doe eyes. They bent into the worry line, flattened their backs with disapproval, and stretched out when her cheeks lifted with amusement. Those eyebrows told me everything I needed to know: I'm happy to run into you again. I've thought about you too. There is nothing to be done about how unhappy we both are.

She hid her slender frame under a baggy sweater, her shoulder peeking out like a pale rock in a rushing river. It was the height of August, but I didn't think she was overdressed. Although streets and subway platforms are relentlessly muggy, New Yorkers expect Arctic air conditioning.

We were on the L-train subway platform at Union Square. Evening rush hour had begun, delayed trains and all. Lori leaned against a tiled wall watching a drummer banging on buckets. Her clear skin made her stand out from the hardened commuters and her cheeks glowed with a rosy sheen. I waved. Eyebrows scrunched together to remember me, then jumped with surprise.

"Jesus, is that you?" She twitched her nose in amazement. "Good, isn't he..." Her head flicked towards the bucket player.

He was good, if ear-splitting chaos in a steam room was your thing. She bobbed her head to the beat and the line of her neck danced back and forth.

"When's the last time?" I said. "Must have been somewhere in Boston, right? A year or two ago?" It was three years, a Wednesday open mic at the Kendall Cafe in Cambridge. Her low, bluesy voice surged in my memory.

"Maybe Club Passim?" Her shiny hair was tied in a pony-tail, darker than I remembered. Strands kept falling in her face, and she tucked them behind her ear.

"That sounds right." It wasn't. I rested against the dirty tiles, legs crossed at the ankles. Sweat seeped through the back of my teeshirt.

She raised her voice. "Where you headed?" The drummer had gotten louder, hitting the metal edges for our enjoyment.

She was on the 8th avenue-bound side. I was going home to Brooklyn. "West Village, same as you," I said.

She nodded. After a few more deafening minutes the train rushed into the platform and braked with a screech that drowned out even the busker.

"Hold the door," she called, and dropped a bill in the guy's bucket. People in the subway car rolled their eyes. She ducked in and flashed a grin.

Only a few seats were available and Lori slid back into one. I held the pole over her, tucking my elbows in, unsure how much the wet patches under my armpits had grown.

"I'm starting at a new restaurant," she said. "American upscale. The chef seems kind of crazy, though."

I glanced at her sweater. "That your uniform?" Her eyebrows dropped and she blinked.

"I hate waitressing," she said. "I just know I'm gonna suck."

I couldn't think of a single thing to say, despite loads of practice I'd logged in with other girls. After a year in a loft with six guys Living The Dream, here's what I'd learned: in New York there was always someone new. Except now my tongue was thick and my head fuzzy.

"What about you?" she asked.

"I'm still playing," I said, picking invisible lint off my tee-shirt. "Doing the whole solo thing, some tours along the East Coast. Got a studio in Brooklyn, so that's keeping me busy."

Lies. The past few years had been a demoralizing blur of hard drugs and drinking. Self pity was my closest friend, the only one who still listened. My hair was thinning and I'd recently put on weight. Even the buttons of my favourite Levis were beginning to argue with me.

At five years old I had the following epiphany — I am destined to be a famous musician. Since then I'd bet everything on that certainty. I wasn't in it for the fame, but in the back of my mind I thought someday I'd be loved.

Lately the acid realisation of failure ate away at my throat. I was having panic attacks, mostly at night; the decanter of Maker's Mark at my bedside needed constant refilling.

The train slowed and Lori braced her hands on her knees. "This is me. You going on?"

"I can walk just as easily from here," I said. Her lips curled in a smile that made me feel helpless.

We climbed to the turnstile. A sticky grime hung in the air and there was no relief on the street. Yellow cabs and buses coughed out blistering fumes.

We walked down 6th avenue, past Murray's Bagels, the stationery store, and the newsstand. Lori stayed silent. Then in front of Rite Aid she said, "I'm playing tomorrow night at Micky's Blue Room."

I jumped on it. "What time?"

"7:30, real time 8. Avenue C between 10th and 11th. There's no cover."

"This is me." I pointed to whatever street we were on, like I had business there. "See you tomorrow, Lori."

"Cool," she said. It occurred to me she probably didn't remember my name.

I walked all the way back to Union Square, in case she happened to turn around. The plaza was crowded with office workers, and pigeons pecked at their corporate crumbs. An old man sold fruit from his stand, calling out his prices in a heavy accent. In August the New Yorkers that can afford to leave, do; the rest of us battle it out with the tourists. But looking at the blur of flip flops and heels, I wasn't in a hurry to get back to my un-air-conditioned loft. The vision of Lori was still with me. I handed the fruit man a quarter and sat down with my banana.

* * *

The next night I allowed an hour to make the twenty minute journey to Manhattan. I wore my old shit-kickers. They grounded me, and had the added benefit of making me two inches taller.

Way before I needed to be, I was weaving through East Village hipsters. I lingered in front of a thrift shop, checking out the Hawaiian shirts and cargo shorts. It was the latest thing; everyone wanted to look like Brad Pitt on his day off.

Micky's Blue Room was a predictable blue, with swirling hand-painted letters spelling out its name.

The bartender smiled. "What can I get you?"

A sign behind him read: "PBR cans \$1." How trailer-park trendy. He wore a John Deere tractor cap, ironically of course. No one in this room had ever been on a farm.

"Pint of Stella," I said. I hated Stella, but it was the first draft I saw.

"Four bucks." He slid me a glass still warm from the dishwasher. I left a dollar tip, turning around to the small room.

She was sitting at a corner table hunched over, reading. A pen twisted in her mouth and traced her frown. She looked down at the paper as a cat would gaze on an aquarium, scribbling occasionally with a twitch of her tail.

The bartender caught her eye and held up five fingers. She gathered her writing and headed for a door at the back of the room, returning with a guitar in one hand and the papers in the other.

A bearded musician onstage unplugged his cables and took his nearly empty beer. "Looking forward to your new one, Lori," he said.

"You sounded awesome," she said, stepping onto the tiny platform. He watched as she bent down to lay her papers under the mic stand. It was hard not to.

She wore a crisp white shirt rolled up to the elbows, her black flats twitching around as she set up. Her hair was in a twist, the only makeup a curve of eyeliner. She had an exotic beauty too sophisticated for the room.

Standing on tip-toes in front of the microphone, she waited with head tilted as though a preacher listening for whispers from heaven. The lights dimmed to a spotlight.

"Hello Tuesday, nice to see you again. I wrote this one today."

And the voice I hadn't heard in three years flowed back into my ears, lava, thick and warm.

"Can you hear me," she sang, first gentle, then rising until she hit stabs of notes with the ease of a 60s soul singer. Her fingerpicking was simple and effective, an old black man from Mississippi playing on his back porch. The brown eyes blazed, skin translucent. She hugged her guitar, arching away to reach up the neck. I put my pint down for fear of dropping it. A perfect high note, a cascade to a whisper. Not once did she look down at the papers on the floor.

"I'm lost, come find me." The final chord rang out. Stillness covered the room. No one ordered at the bar. A few brave people began to clap, then we all erupted in a hungry cheer.

She interrupted us. "I don't have my electric, so bear with me for this next one," she said.

I have eight desert island discs, which I revise and re-order. Number one has never changed, though; I will have it played at my funeral. Jimi Hendrix's "Little Wing" was my spiritual awakening.

The first octave slide escaped Lori's guitar. Her fingers moved as though confiding in an old friend. There was something feminine in her approach, and it broke my heart with a vengeance I hadn't expected. She was Jimi's lonely stray girl.

The walls simultaneously closed in and expanded outwards. The stage felt miles away, but Lori's voice swirled in my brain until I was claustrophobic. I considered sitting down, or getting some air.

And then with a final stab she breathed, "thank you," tucking her hair behind her ear and smiling.

The unassuming girl in the subway was back. She unplugged her guitar and gathered the papers. People swarmed as she walked through the room. No, sorry, she didn't have CDs to sell. Yes, she wrote most of the songs she'd played. No, sorry, she didn't have a mailing list they could sign. Her tiny frame was dwarfed by the crowd and all I saw were glimpses of her white shirt.

She picked a path to the stock room to put her guitar away, and made a beeline for the bar. This was my opportunity.

"I can't believe how far you've come," I said. Pathetic. Patronizing.

"The monitors here are shit." She smiled, the glow of adrenaline wearing off. She winked at the bartender.

He grinned. "Usual?"

He filled a pint glass with orange juice, topped off with club soda so it frothed over.

"I'd expected a bourbon after that performance," I said.

She didn't look up.

"Let me record that first song for you, the new one. I've got some pretty good old microphones. Ten minutes off the Bedford stop."

"I'm just starting this new job," she said.

"I'd do it as a favor. You're that good." I leaned in closer, hoping I didn't sound as desperate as I felt.

She lifted an eyebrow and took the napkin from under her glass. "I'm around this weekend," she said, scribbling her number.

On another napkin I wrote my address, making sure to write "John" next to my cell phone.

The bearded musician sauntered up, talking guitar pedals. I interrupted them to say goodbye. With the napkin in my wallet, I pushed open the door to a wave of heat and followed my boots into the soggy, humid street.

About the Writer

Nell Bryden is a Brooklyn-born musician. Her classical soprano mother and artist-sculptor father split when she was five, and she left to live in smalltown Massachusetts at eleven. She explored several musical avenues, from jazz to opera, before finding the singer-songwriter in herself and recording her own work, the epitome of the self-starting independent artist.

Nell's incisive songs have made her a familiar figure on live stages and radio playlists. She has released eight albums; nineteen of her singles have been playlisted on BBC Radio 2, and Cher and Susan Boyle have covered her songs. Her global tours have included playing for the American and British services in Iraq. In 2009 her second tour was made into a documentary film executive produced by Nile Rodgers, called "Striking A Chord," which explored the healing power of music for PTSD. Six years ago, the stress from constant touring caught up, and she developed Alopecia Universalis, leaving her completely bald. Nell embraced her new look and decided to forgo wigs.



As she set about to follow her most recent album, she fulfilled a lifetime ambition to express herself not only as a composer and performer of music, but an an author. Living in downtown Manhattan on 9/11 was a defining moment and her debut novel "Little Wing" explores this time period.

After living in London for ten years, she has recently moved home to New York. She is married to a Brit and they have a four year old daughter.