

TLC Showcase

MIRIAM BURKE

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Introduction to *Women and Love*

The stories in my collection explore how women deal with different kinds of love. The women come from a wide range of social and cultural backgrounds and they include a burglar, a GP, a homeless woman, a wife dealing her husband's decision to change gender, an emigrant cleaner, and a lesbian couple trying to choose a donor for their child.

Many of the stories involve characters from one social world having to interact with people from a very different world. The stories provide a portrait of contemporary Britain and the challenges facing women from diverse backgrounds.

I grew up in the West of Ireland when it was culturally monochromatic so I really appreciate the richness of a multicultural society. I worked as a clinical psychologist for many years in London hospitals and GP practices and this gave me the opportunity to learn about and appreciate cultural and social backgrounds that were very different from my own. The stories in my collection are about different kinds of love because who we choose to love and how we love says so much about us.

My stories were being published in journals and winning competitions but I was finding it difficult to get a collection published. Irish people and Americans love the short story form but British people don't buy short stories so publishers in the UK aren't interested in short story collections. I sent a collection of my stories to the TLC for assessment and the report I received was extremely helpful. The reader identified the weakness and strengths in the stories, and the tone was very encouraging. The feedback gave me a clear idea of what needed to be done to strengthen the collection. I rewrote the stories and the collection was published by the wonderful Renard Press.

Extract from *Women and Love* by Miriam Burke

Vincerò

I love my job. I love standing in the darkness taking in the smell of their cooking, a whiff of perfume, or a trace of lemon fabric conditioner on a clean tea-towel. Tony and I stand very still for a few minutes to make sure we haven't been heard. We come in the garden door which usually has a spring-latch that we can open in a few seconds with a credit card. We have a bolt cutter for patio doors.

Tony moves the beam of his torch around the kitchen while we look for phones, tablets, and car keys. I check the sink for watches or rings. We move very quietly from room to room; we wear the rubber soled aqua shoes that people use to protect their feet from sea urchins. We're dressed in puffer jackets and designer jeans so we can say we're friends of the owners if a neighbour sees us. We put on latex gloves and balaclavas before we go into the house.

Tony did a computing course so we can research our subjects; that's what we like to call them. We nick something from their letter box to get a name and he researches them on the internet. He can get into anyone's social media account and he finds out if they're going away on a summer holiday or returning to another country for Christmas. We watch a house for days before paying our visit. I did a course in art appreciation to make sure we don't miss a good painting and I once worked for a woman who has a shop selling antique jewellery in Westbourne Grove; she told me I had a good eye. Our fences don't try to cheat us because we know what everything is worth.

Tony is my brother. He's black and I'm white so we didn't have the same parents but he's a real brother; we lived next door growing up and his mother always fed me if our fridge was empty and I slept on their sofa when I got locked out. His mother, Laticia, is from Barbados and she turned our South London council estate into a Barbadian village. She looked after strays like me and grown-ups went to her when they were in trouble. She's a big woman with a loud voice and no-one messes with her; no one except her husband but he was hardly ever there.

My mother was a drunk. There should be a word for a lovely, cheerful drunk because she wasn't like the image in your head. She'd wake me by throwing her arms around

me and say: 'I love you, darling. I love, love you, love you.' Her Longford accent never changed because she spent all her time in Irish pubs.

'Get off me,' I'd say, pulling away from her stale whiskey breath. Coke and whiskey was her drink.

'Don't you love your poor mother?'

I'd look at the clock and say: 'I'll be late again – Sister Assumpta will kill me.'

'Feck Sister Assumpta. Stay with me today. We'll have a little party; just the two of us.' She'd start singing and I'd push her off me, pull on my school uniform, and run to school.

Tony is very tall and I'm small. I fit in a bathroom window and that can save us a lot of time. Tony likes men but he can never tell his mother because it would bring shame on her. She hopes he'll marry me. I like men too but in small doses. I have a few days fun and then I don't want to see them again. If I ever have a child, I'd like Tony to be the father.

'If a thing is worth doing, it's worth doing properly'. That's what Sister Assumpta used to say. And it's why we never get caught. We don't go for new money; they could have a gun or know how to use a knife. We like the kind of people who have always felt safe in the world; people who don't have alarms because they live in a neighbourhood with a low crime rate, people who have inherited jewellery and paintings.

We taught ourselves how to use knives. We studied anatomy diagrams on the internet and we practised on stuffed bin bags. We bought filleting knives from a shop that sells kitchen equipment and we keep them sharpened. We never work with anyone else and we keep our business to ourselves. People can't grass on you if they know nothing.

I was smart but I didn't do any homework because there was always too much noise. My mother was either singing along to the radio or she was laughing and drinking with men she'd found in a pub. If she had a man staying the night, she locked me in my bedroom until I was old enough to lock it myself. I'd often be woken in the night by the sound of the door handle being turned.

The teachers concentrated on the girls whose parents would complain if they didn't get good grades. They knew what street every family lived on, the kind of car they

drove. When I asked my mother why she sent me to a convent school, she said: 'It's good preparation for life; you'll learn never to trust anyone in charge.' I sat at the back of the class wearing a uniform I had outgrown and a white blouse with dirty cuffs.

I decided to make friends with a quiet girl whose mother drove a Mercedes. She didn't belong to any gang so she was easy picking. I got her to invite me back to her place after school by saying I'd like to hear a cd she'd bought. The house smelt of polished antique furniture mixed with freesias picked from their garden, and roasting meat. Her mother's eyes went cold when she saw me; you can't hide poverty, and I was never invited back.

We change our number plates before we set out on a job. We drive a silver Golf, the kind of car a wife would use to drive children to school and we park a street away. We never do more than one job in a neighbourhood.

We tell people we buy stuff at car boot sales and markets, do any repairs and cleaning needed, and sell on eBay for a big mark-up. We're careful not to flash too much money about. Holidays are our thing. We've been everywhere; L.A., Sydney, Cape Town, Goa. We collect air miles and we always get an upgrade. We tell everyone we're going to Ibiza.

Tony's Dad was Nigerian and he would appear every few years when some woman had thrown him out and Tony's mother would take him back because her pastor told her it was her Christian duty. His sons hated their father because he made them treat him as if he was a tribal chief. When they complained to their mother, she'd tell them they had to honour their father.

I have no idea who my father is. All I know is that when things got so bad my mother was pawning our furniture, a cheque would arrive. I figure she was blackmailing my father because she came over from Ireland to have me when she was only just sixteen which means my father was a child abuser. He must have been a teacher, a married friend of the family, or maybe a priest; someone with a reputation to lose. I don't think she would have loved me so much if her father or brother was my father.

We store everything in a lock-up garage near our estate. We keep things a while before we pass them on to our fences. The only thing we have to shift quickly is cars. We have a contact who has them out of the country within twenty-four hours.

We make serious money from luxury cars. Our fences know nothing about us so we don't worry if they get nicked. We take it in turns to contact them and they don't know we're working together.

My mother's memory was shot by the time she was fifty. I took her out of the nursing home the council put her in because I didn't like how the staff talked to her. I found a private home with a bar for the residents and I top up the fees paid by the council. She started singing again when she moved there. She thinks I'm one of the nurses.

Tony moved into the flat with me when my mother was taken away. We spent two weeks scrubbing the floors, and painting walls. And we ordered a truck full of furniture from a Danish design shop after we nicked a BMW convertible that was only a few months old. I worry sometimes that Tony will meet someone and move out but the kind of guys he likes aren't interested in marrying a black boy from a council estate.

We never talk about what would happen if we're caught. I sometimes wake in the night and imagine what it would be like to be locked away for the best years of my life, to be trapped in a prison full of mad fuckers; I watched every episode of 'Bad Girls'. My mother would have to leave the nursing home and I wouldn't be able to see her. And I think about what would happen to Tony in a men's prison and I know he wouldn't survive it.

About the Writer

Miriam Burke grew up in the West of Ireland and she lives in London. She has a PhD in psychology and worked for many years as a clinical psychologist in the NHS. Her short stories have been published in anthologies and journals such as The Manchester Review, Litro Magazine, Fairlight Shorts, The Honest Ulsterman, Bookanista, and Writers' Forum. And a collection of her short stories called 'Women and Love' was published in 2022 by Renard Press.

