



TLC SHOWCASE

ELIZABETH LEE

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Introduction to *Cunning Women*

A few years ago I watched a documentary about the Pendle witch trials, and was moved and fascinated by the plight of the family involved; isolated from the local community and desperately poverty stricken, they were incredibly vulnerable. Yet they were also believed to possess great magical power, believed themselves to have it too, and were not above using it to punish those that angered them. I couldn't stop thinking about what it must be like to live in this position of both vulnerability and power, especially for a teenaged girl, as the eldest child in the family was at the time. From this came the character of Sarah, and the story that became *Cunning Women*.

I made some progress submitting the novel to agents, with a number asking to see the full manuscript, but was always rejected at this point. Receiving a TLC Free Read awarded by Writing West Midlands in 2018 made all the difference – the editorial advice was generous, detailed and insightful. I still use some of the advice I was given when writing now.

Having edited the novel according to the notes in the TLC report, I submitted an extract from it when applying for the Curtis Brown Creative Marian Keyes scholarship later that year, and was lucky enough to be awarded the place. Another wonderful opportunity to develop my skills, and to meet the friendly and talented writers on the course, albeit online!

I signed with my agent, Lucy Morris at Curtis Brown, in April 2019, and the book was published by Hutchinson Heinemann in 2021.

Cunning Women is a story of love against the odds, set against the backdrop of superstition and paranoia in 17th Century Lancashire.

Extract from *Cunning Women* by Elizabeth Lee

Screaming, a sound to stop the heart and freeze the blood. Someone was in trouble. Daniel ran, afraid of what he would find but determined to save the poor creature that suffered so.

The noise came towards him at full pelt, inside a tiny frame, all flying limbs and flapping hair. She crashed into him with surprising force and strength, knocking him to the ground. He caught the creature, held on though it was like trying to grasp an eel.

‘Shh. It’s all right, you’re safe now.’

‘Let go,’ the child yelled, struggling harder.

‘Settle down,’ he said. ‘You’re—’ The little fingers grabbed his hair and yanked. ‘Ow, wait ...’

Daniel loosened his grip and the child ran into the arms of the Haworth girl, who stood over him. His stomach gave an unpleasant lurch. He wasn’t sure whether with anticipation or trepidation. Why had he come?

‘What are you doing to my sister?’ she asked.

He sat up, rubbing his stinging scalp. Fought the urge to run. He regretted now whatever demented impulse had led him here. Searching for courage, though the blood beat through him so fast that he felt it roaring under his skin, he found his tongue at last. ‘Y-you’re better to ask what she’s doing to me.’

‘Were you stealing her?’

He could not tell whether it was sunlight or witchery that lit her eyes. He stood, scrambled to his feet, ready to run if need be. ‘I thought she was hurt, the poor thing. She – I was trying to help.’

The poor thing snarled at him from the protection of her sister’s arms. He held up his palms.

‘My mistake.’

‘Not your first.’

‘Certainly not.’

She watched him over the top of the child's tangled head, her eyes startling dark blue, bright against her dirt-smudged skin. The wind snatched the untamed tangle of her hair from her face. There was an unexpected sweetness to the curve of her jaw, a slant to her lips that might have been mocking or friendly.

'Well. I'll leave you be.' He meant to walk away, but did not move. She seemed no more than a girl, but they were about some heathen ritual, perhaps. He had heard such stories of the family.

'She ran because I tried to wash her.'

'Oh?'

'Aye. She's teeming. Lops.'

'L— what?'

'You know.' She imitated scratching her hair.

'Oh.' Perhaps a more earthly reason than witchcraft after all. He remembered once again her smile as he tamed the mare.

The contempt the girl wore was a thin shell, which barely hid a depth filled with fear. His instinct, as with any living creature that attacked because it was afraid, was to calm it.

The brother's face drifted through his mind. Was she a demon like he? Had she willed Daniel to seek her out, for he could not fathom why he had? He should go.

He wanted to flee now. Every part of him poised to leave. The child was slight, hair dirty and matted, the girl's eyes a storm of defiance and doubt. They needed help, not fear. Just as in his attempt to protect the lamb from her brother, and against every warning crying out within, moved once again by another's pain he stepped forward when he should have stepped away.

Daniel crouched so that he was level with the child's filthy face. 'Don't you like the river?'

She bared her teeth.

'You know there are fishes in there the colour of the moon.'

She unfolded her arms.

'And shells that whisper the sound of the sea.'

She inclined her head.

Daniel stood and shrugged. 'Still. If you don't want to see, we'll leave them.'

The child looked up at her sister, tugging on her arm. 'We could just look,' the older girl said. 'If you like.'

They all walked to the water's edge. Daniel unlaced his boots and took off his socks, picking his way through the rocks to paddle in the shallows, head bent to the water. A glance showed them lingering at the bank.

'Quick,' he said. 'A fish. Come, see. Take a step in, just cover your toes.'

'I'm going to,' the girl said, leaving the child and walking in.

Daniel touched her arm, and she glanced at him, startled, expression guarded. He pointed to the little fish swimming near her ankle. She peered down with delight, as though he had shown her the actual moon. 'You've seen them before?' he asked.

She shook her head. 'We don't like the water.'

He did not question. The sea and river both sustained and destroyed, providing food and taking its pay in the lives of the men that sailed it, the women that washed clothes in it. Most could not swim, and even he only did so in the calmer waters of the river. 'You're safe here,' he said.

Her smile was sudden and bright. Surely there could be no deceit in it. 'Come on, Annie,' she said. 'Come, sken.'

The child paddled in, petticoat dangling in the water.

'Here,' Daniel said, crouching, reaching down to the muddy bed. 'Look.'

As he cupped his hand and caught the fish she came closer, bending so that her hair spread and floated in the gentle sway. He opened his palm and showed her the creature as it jerked and twisted.

'You found one,' she said. 'Is it a moon fish?'

He laughed. 'It's – well yes. As good a name as any. We have to put it back now. Help me find another? Look closely.'

She turned slowly, hands and arms in the river, face almost touching the surface.

Daniel looked at the girl, standing behind the child.

‘Her hair’s already wet,’ he said.

She began to cup water and pour it over her sister’s hair. The child frowned and batted the girl away.

‘There’s one,’ Daniel said. ‘See? Want to hold it?’

The child spat out the rivulets that trickled down her face and held her hands out. Daniel gave her the fish, smiling as she gasped. She could not have looked happier if he’d filled her arms with honey cake.

‘Done?’ he asked the sister. She nodded. He took the child’s hands and placed them in the water so that the fish was freed. She was shivering now.

‘Well,’ he said. ‘Enough for today perhaps?’ He pinched her chin softly.

They waded out, the girls holding hands, legs shining wet. Ragged clothes fanning out in the water, damp matted hair gleaming in the sun. Beautiful wretches. Daniel retrieved his boots and socks.

The girl jerked her hand out towards him, a pebble resting on her palm. ‘To thank you,’ she said.

He took it from her, studying the smooth grey stone, still wet from the river.

‘Mammy will be cross,’ the child whispered, gasping.

‘Not if we don’t tell.’

‘Oh that’s nice,’ he said. ‘With the hole in.’

She looked at him as though he was an idiot. ‘Aye, it’s a hag stone. Brings protection from curses and such, haven’t you one on the farm to keep the milk from souring?’

He shook his head. ‘My father does not hold with—’

The child hopped from foot to foot. ‘And if you look through the hole you might see a fairy, or put it in the river and see a water sprite.’

Daniel turned the stone in his hand. ‘A great gift. I shall treasure it.’

‘Aye,’ the girl said. ‘You should.’ She shook the child’s arm gently. ‘What dost say to the lad?’

'Daniel,' he said.

The child had her thumb in her mouth. 'Thank you,' she said around it, then looked up at her sister. 'But I didn't get the whispering shell.'

He laughed. 'Another time.' He began walking away, then turned back. 'What's your name?'

A look of suspicion scudded across her face. 'Why?'

He flushed, confused. 'I – it's just – what people do.'

'Oh.' She frowned, drawing back, as though suspecting him of some trickery.

'So?' Talking to her was like travelling somewhere new without knowing the route.

She hesitated, watching him. He waited. 'Sarah,' she said.

He spoke without thinking. 'That's pretty.'

She started, scowling as though he had insulted her. 'You needn't look so surprised.'

'No, no. I'm not, of course, it's just, it suits you.' He took a breath. Too late now to be cautious. For once, he wanted to be bold. 'It's – well, it's pretty.'

Daniel bent his head to hide the blush, hurrying back over the mud, pebbles and grass in his bare feet. He pressed the stone into his palm, wondering at the strength of its powers; could it protect him from his own desire to see her again? Would it shelter them from the accusing eyes of the village if he could not resist?

About the Writer

Elizabeth Lee was awarded the Curtis Brown Creative Marian Keyes Scholarship in 2018, and her work has been selected for the Womentoring Project, Penguin's WriteNow Live and a TLC Free Read through Writing West Midlands. Her debut novel *Cunning Women* was published in 2021. She lives in Warwickshire.



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