Review of *Vera Magpie* by Laura Solomon

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Laura Solomon, in this Fay Weldonesque novella, looks at female entrapment, in marriage and in the literal sense of being imprisoned, via the unlikely and sometimes unreliable narrator of Vera Magpie. The story blithely opens with, 'I have murdered three husbands.' Vera is currently in prison for being a bit too enthusiastic in knocking off her latest husband.

Like many women who kill, Vera is a product of her own flawed past. This is the story of Vera's life from childhood, and in particular her experiences with abusive men. Raised in a lighthouse under dubious circumstances, young Vera is abused by her stepfather and is bullied at school. She responds by turning mute, and vindictively wetting her pants. 'The lighthouse began to smell like some Barcelona alley.' When her mother discovers the abuse, she kicks out the stepfather, and Bill the fisherman moves in, so life begins to improve, along with the regular provision of smoked mackerel.

From early on, there is an interesting mix of childhood fantasies of adult life and reality, bringing into question which is which. Vera makes friends with Ingrid at high school, and the girls form a band. 'Ingrid did the vocals from behind the drums, like Karen Carpenter, only without the anorexia.' They call themselves the Devon Duo and experience some success: easily a possible dream scenario in Vera's off-beat life.

Next, Vera gets a job in a laundromat in London and paints in her spare time - 'great vistas that I saw in my mind; barren red rocky outcrops like the surface of Mars, jagged Carpathian-style mountains, snowy, crystalline expanses, with the sunlight glinting dangerously off the snow.' There is humour in the juxtaposition of Vera's grandiose landscapes and the prosaic reality of working in a laundromat.

Meanwhile, lawyer Libby Clements is going to defend Vera in a retrial, using Battered Women's Syndrome as a defence, and Vera is studying English Literature in prison. The essay topics seem to comment on Vera's own life as a woman: 'Sexual Politics in *Pride and Prejudice'*, 'Gender Politics in the Novels of Margaret Atwood', and 'Innocence Lost in Twentieth Century Literature'. This perhaps offers an alternative framing of Vera's experiences; and there is the unspoken question of whether Vera would have been more fulfilled as a woman without her marriages.

Just as Vera finds redemption (and some answers to the big questions) through education, so too her new friend Shirley - also in prison for murder - expands her horizons. Previously a hairdresser, Shirley takes inspiration from Vera's example and starts studying genetics, though when she gets out, she'll stick to the hairdressing. 'Genetics is just a hobby - something to occupy my mind.'

The narrator's jokey tone lightens the darker aspects of the novella, as the husbands get knocked off. The first one, Gary the plumber, turns into another kind of abuser once they are married. 'A normal woman would simply have instigated a divorce, but I was no normal woman. I made him one of my special steak, kidney and death cap mushroom pies.'

Then Vera meets Harry Fennel, IT Manager, and they get married. 'A cake as big as a house. A big meringue of a dress with a train as long as Lady’s Di’s. A big sloppy kiss to seal the deal. I thought I had finally landed on my feet, thought all my Christmases had finally arrived, come chugging into the station. Then I found out about his cocaine habit.' No man is perfect, it seems.

By the time Vera's life finally looks rosy, we have to start wondering about her sanity, as she knocks off husband #3 for apparently no reason except that she has miscarried twins; and as if it is Larry's fault, she poisons him. It is unfortunate for Larry that Vera has acquired a taste for murder.

There is a happy ending for Vera, in the style of one of her own fantasies: the dream becomes reality after all, and there will be no more men - too tempting to knock them off.

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Reviewed by Tina Shaw

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