

PACIFIQUE

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By

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ABSTRACT

Pacifique is a novel of trauma and recovery set in contemporary Victoria, British Columbia. Tia, the protagonist, meets Pacifique one cold February evening. Five sex- and passion-fueled nights later, a bike ride ends with Tia's head colliding with concrete. When she wakes, Pacifique is gone. Worse, it's unclear whether Pacifique ever existed in the first place. Driven mad in the search for a woman who may be a figment of her imagination, Tia is institutionalized in a psychiatric ward. The doctors tell her she is suffering from head-injury induced psychosis; her fellow patients—including Andrew, a man with schizophrenia—urge her to forget Pacifique. Told in chapters alternating between Tia's and Andrew's points of view, the novel keeps readers asking: is Pacifique real? The novel examines notions of credibility and truth: whom to believe? The medical establishment or the “patients”? The novel also examines how behaviour outside the heteronormative—particularly “obsessive” behaviour or “fantasies”—are pathologized in our culture. Fundamentally, the novel is a story about the thin veil between fantasy and reality, about the choices we make to be happy—and how these choices cannot always coexist. Inspired by Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, Holly Luhnig's *Quiver* and Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*, *Pacifique* can be situated within the psychological thriller genre in the way it plays with the notion of reality and alternate realities.

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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Pacifique began in April 2004, when I crashed my bicycle in Esquimalt, B.C. I didn't lose consciousness but I did suffer memory loss. When I "came to," when memory began again, I was being hoisted into an ambulance. My first question was, "Where's Paul?" We had been riding together. From the front seat of the ambulance, Paul said, "I'm here." Later, we talked about that moment. Paul said, "What if you asked, 'Where's Paul?' and I wasn't there." The seed for *Pacifique* was planted. I began writing prompted by the powerful "What if?" Later, I read Stephen King's *On Writing*, in which he suggests this "What if?" is a powerful motivator for story, for plot. I agree.

The story begins before that, though. Two and a half years earlier, I had been incarcerated in a psychiatric facility for anti-depressant-induced mania. I would come out after a three-week stay with a diagnosis of bipolar. This diagnosis lives with me still; many times over the years I have fought with it. Nobody wants to be labelled. Nobody wants "mentally ill" to reside in their medical chart. For many years I had tried and failed (and still try, and still fail) to write about that experience, to put it into story and essay, to make sense of that trauma. I could never get it right. With *Pacifique*, I have used my experience to write a novel from a patient's perspective, but patients who aren't *me*. This enabled me to get distance while still allowing space for my insight as a former psych ward resident.

A major influence on my writing over the past decade has been, of course, Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, published in 1962. One problem with Kesey's book is appropriation, especially prominent in his character Chief. First, Kesey wrote an Aboriginal character from a non-Aboriginal perspective; second, Chief is a psychiatric patient. Kesey was not a psychiatric patient. Kesey worked as an orderly in a psychiatric hospital.

Pacifique is more than a voice from the inside, from the other side, from this side. There are no sides, no us and them when it comes to the mentally "ill" and the mentally "well": there is just us and we. This novel is a manifesto, in part, for the people who have been burdened with these labels. For those who believe in things that others don't, who have visions. In the weeks and months before my hospitalization, I had visions. Understood the universe in a way I never had before. In the aftermath, when I was once again pronounced "sane," I had a conversation with an old friend. I said, "I thought I was a genius." My friend suggested that thought wasn't delusion but rather a form of truth. I didn't know if I agreed with him but the overall message still irks me: was the reality I knew when I was manic actually delusion? Or something else?

There are other themes at work in *Pacifique*. While travelling in the summer of 2013, I met two Swedish women at a vegetarian café in Inverness, Scotland. I told them about the novel. Malin, one of the women, said, "I like the metaphor: the way *Pacifique* is treated as fantasy in the same way that same-sex love is treated as fantasy by most of the world." I have an ulterior motive here: I wanted to portray a story of same-sex love and desire. Andrew acts as the conservative, homophobic voice. Tia is the uncertain, open voice. By positioning *Pacifique* in the realm of the imaginary, I give her (and her love affair with Tia) greater breadth. The portrayal of lesbian sex in this novel seeks to disrupt the marginalization and fetishization of lesbian sex in the mainstream by putting it front and centre and, to some extent, normalizing it without making it ordinary. Can what the mainstream views as "deviant" be, in fact, quite common—a natural pattern in need of integration?

I wrote *Pacifique* to give voice to those who are silenced and to those who fight with a psychiatric health care system that continually tells its patients, “No. You are wrong. This is not right. It is illness.” My question for my readers is this, “What if it isn’t wrong at all? What if this is simply a different reality, but reality all the same? What if on the other side of the veil is another real life, a life only certain people can see and experience?” My belief system is that the mad and the sane are not on either side of a fence, a coin, even at either end of a spectrum. They are plot points on a möbius strip, they are galaxies in the universe, they are the scientific discoveries we haven’t made yet but which someone dreamed in a novel two hundred years ago.

I do not believe I have written *The New and Improved One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest: Now With No Appropriation!* I do not know Andrew’s state of mind, not fully. I have perhaps gone beyond my rights by casting a character with schizophrenia when I do not have that diagnosis myself. I have never received a diagnosis of head trauma-induced psychosis, as Tia has. I am appropriating those voices. Andrew’s talk of “the system” is inspired, in part, by “The Combine” that Kesey’s Chief believes in, in part by my own belief system, and in part by the belief systems of my religious friends, my spiritual friends and my mad friends. “I was inspired by” is writer code for “I appropriated.” The container is imperfect; the galaxy is always expanding or shrinking, depending who you ask. “There is a crack in everything,” Leonard Cohen said. “That’s how the light gets in.”

The plot drives toward one question: is *Pacifique* real? Underneath, I aim for something deeper: what is madness? Will you, dear reader, reconsider your tack? Will you reconsider your definitions of fantasy, delusion, reality, norms, insanity, love? Will you believe?

—Sarah L. Taggart
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