

The *oh comely* book club

words terri-jane dow
illustration monika petrovaite

For this issue, we've been reading Dana Spiotta's *Innocents and Others*. Our London #ohcobookclub met in Clerkenwell to discuss our thoughts, and we've also spoken to Dana to discover the inspiration and ideas behind her novel. →

Innocents and Others focuses on the friendship between

Meadow and Carrie, filmmakers of critical and commercial success, as well as Jelly, a phone “phreaker” who uses her telephone persona to seduce powerful men. It’s a novel about female friendship, film and art and how we tell our stories to the world.

In our in-real-life London book club, we talked about the intricacies of female friendships, how people are observed, and how that alters what they do, as well as speculating if there were any real ‘innocents’ in the novel.



“It’s written almost like how you would watch a film.” Hannah



“The book uses different senses as a means of escape.” Alexa



“Every section of the book feels like it’s a filmic shot.” Becky



“Everyone in the story ended up with a tidy ending.” Bethany



“The characters are complex, you don’t get anyone’s full stories.” Nicole



“Who are the ‘innocents’ and who are the ‘others’?” Elizabeth



Meet the author

Terri-Jane Dow speaks to Dana Spiotta

Innocents and Others is Dana Spiotta's fourth book. Dana lives in New York, but her novel explores a particularly West Coast obsession: films. It's one of the best-researched novels I've ever read; from its depictions of Meadow's obsessive devotion to her art, to the detail with which Dana writes about phone "phreaking". We speak to Dana (using a more conventional telephoning method) from Syracuse University, where she teaches creative writing.

Innocents and Others explores women making art, in different ways. And it's not always sympathetic. Meadow, for example, is quite a hard character. When I wrote Meadow, I wanted her to really be devoted to art. I wanted her obsession to be extreme. She has a lot of privilege and she is very focused and monolithic about it. On the other hand, if she were a man, we'd read it in a different way. I think that people are harder on her because she's a female character and people aren't used to seeing that. She's not interested in being soft in a way that women are conventionally soft.

And for juxtaposition you have Carrie, who does get married and has kids, and is still very successful, more commercially successful than Meadow.

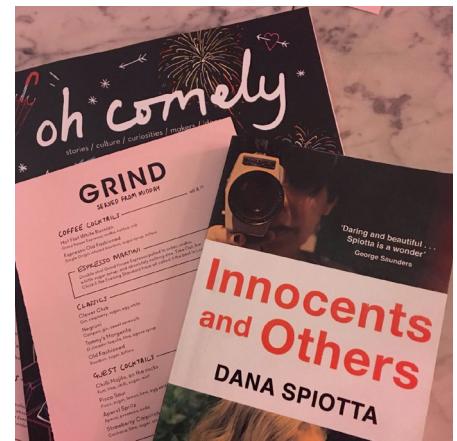
She's arguably no less an artist than Meadow is. Carrie is more mainstream, because that's what she loves. She's not

a sell-out, she's just different. You don't see her inner life as an artist really until the last half, after her big essay. She's important to me because she really does love Meadow, and shows you what's lovable about Meadow, or what's admirable about her. Some people when they read the book wonder why Carrie is friends with Meadow when it seems so one sided.

It's a fascinating portrait of female friendship.

I have lifelong friends and you can't replace them. They remember who you are and who you wanted to be. They hold you to a certain idea of yourself. People who haven't known you your whole life can't really do that.

Carrie says at one point that a marriage must be this perfect thing or you get divorced, but a friendship can be uneven, you can be mean to each other, and it bounces back. It's true that sometimes friends break up with each other, but in my experience it's more that people go in and out. It's not as pressured as a romantic relationship, as you don't expect that other person to be everything in the same way. With Carrie and Meadow, they've actually helped each other a lot, to become the women they wanted to be. There's good that comes out of their competitiveness. They've helped each other become artists.



Jelly, arguably, is an artist too, with her ability to manipulate others.

She's an artist of a different kind - a con artist. What's interesting is that Jelly has a lot in common with Meadow, they both have this control thing that they do with their medium, they're both seductive.

Meadow talks about the "compulsion to confess" driving her filmmaking, but she really only wants it if she's in control of it...

She discovers when she's still quite young that if you put a camera in front of somebody, it'll bring something out of them. There's something in it that makes her feel powerful, because she also understands more about it than the →



subject. She doesn't have a lot of empathy. She wants to be unsentimental and she wants to confront the audience, and that impulse is good, but the cost to the person that she's using is the problem.

And when she loses that control, she does – literally – run away from it. →

It's asking what happens when your certainties become something you start to question. It was important for Meadow to have a lot of confidence in the beginning for her to make it plausible that she could be undone – as we all can be. Meadow's

how we perform our identities, and what we do when there isn't an audience. So much of it is about who we are when we're interacting with certain technologies, a phone, or filming, or being filmed, and those things tend to shape us more than we realise.

And it shows that art, such as documentary making, that purports to be truthful is also a performance.

It's about how to tell stories and what your responsibility is. When Meadow sees how much distortion can happen, it becomes

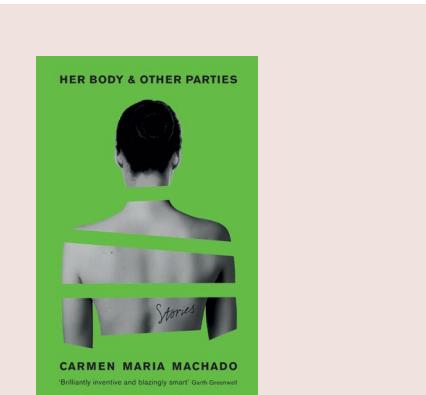
“Creating art can become about your ego when you think you’re doing something else”

unwinding is a series of things, like Jelly asking Meadow what any of it is for. The idea of exposing truth, when truth is just damaging to others, is when you then get the idea that creating art can become about your ego, when you think you're doing something else.

The idea of performing that runs through the book is really interesting.

At the end, when you find out what happened, it's not being mediated by anyone, it's not being filmed, it's not being performed. It seemed important to explore

an aesthetic crisis for her and not just an ethical one. It's ironic that Meadow thinks that she's very good at telling these harsh truths, but she's so blind to her own self-deceptions. Many of us are. As an artist that's something I think about a lot. There are some characters in the book that are based on real people, so you have to think about that and it's difficult. And asking yourself those questions, as a human as well as an artist: why am I doing this? What are my motives? Has the story I've been telling myself about who I am been accurate? ♦



For our next
#ohcobookclub,
we'll be discussing

**Carmen Maria Machado's
*Her Body and Other Parties***

In this collection of short stories, Carmen Maria Machado bends genre to shape startling narratives that map the realities of women's lives and the violence visited upon their bodies. Earthy and otherworldly, antic and sexy, queer and caustic, comic and deadly serious, *Her Body and Other Parties* swings from horrific violence to the most exquisite sentiment. It's one of the most original books we've read for ages and we can't wait to discuss it with you.

Read along with us

...and look out for details of our next London-based meet-up on social media @ohcomelymag. If you're outside of London and would like to set up your own #ohcobookclub, email our book club editor terri-jane@icebergpress.co.uk