



Symptomatic

Danzy Senna

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A young woman moves to New York City for what promises to be a dream job. Displaced, she feels unsure of her fit in the world. Then comes a look of recognition, a gesture of friendship from an older woman named Greta who shares the same difficult-to-place color of skin. On common ground, a tenuous alliance grows between two women in racial limbo. So too, does the older woman's unnerving obsession, leading to a collision of two lives spiraling out of control. A beautifully written novel, at once suspenseful, erotic, and tantalizingly clever, **Symptomatic** is a groundbreaking contribution to the literature of racial identity.

Symptomatic Details

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Author : Danzy Senna

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LoLo says

At first, this seemed to be a casual stroll in the shoes of a woman subtly observing her experience and interactions in our highly racialized modern society, a study uniquely complicated by her own physical ambiguity. But as I read on, I realized it was much deeper than that, that it was layered with meaning; contextual analysis that was so subtle it could be passed as poetic, and artfully constructed reflections, literal and figurative. The narrator's racial ambiguity gives her a very unique perspective of the state of racialization today, as people reveal their perceptions, prejudices, and preconceived notions through their assumption of, and subsequent reaction to, her racial identity.

Thought-provoking and evocative, this story posits deep, complex questions and issues the way an artist might suggest a form by only constructing the negative space around it, leaving the perceiver to come to the intended space of their own accord, their own deductions, their own understandings.

And woven around all this is a mystery story, suspenseful and unpredictable, dark, and yet somehow, light...

Li Sian says

Danzy Senna is one of the most interesting writers in America today, and I'd highly recommend reading everything she's written (the fiction, yes, but the essays too are great). What was interesting about *Symptomatic* to me is the way she enlarges on certain themes present in her first novel, *Caucasia*, in a less hopeful, more cruel, and arguably more interesting, way. If the misanthropy was blink-and-you'll-miss-it asides in *Caucasia*, and settled fact in *You Are Free*, the short story collection following this, here's it's something to be explored at every twist, the feeling of discomfort building and building, and not just for reasons to do with the plot. And I'll be honest- the plot was the least interesting aspect of the book for me, I saw that twist coming a mile away, but it serves as a fairly sound backbone on which to hang the book on, and what Senna's REALLY interested in talking about: invisibility/passing, the fascination of similarity, inappropriate behaviour, and shit white people say to you when they don't know that you're black. Go read it.

Tisha Marie says

This is an unexpected perspective on internalized racism, integration, and invisibility. As a bi-racial woman, the protagonist is constantly in search of self. The antagonist is clearly searching for self-destruction. Senna creates tension with all the senses and invokes sympathy with minute details. Definitely a powerful novel for all women to read.

Betsy Kipnis says

Senna transfers elements found in her freshman novel, "Caucasia" into "Symptomatic" with her continuing theme of racial identity, broken families, eccentric multi racial parents, moving to a new place and coming of age and adds a little suspense thrill a little late in the narrative. Senna constructs rich inner and outer dialogues for characters as they explore, respond and develop within the larger context with respect to race

and historic and social implications both internally and externally. Senna's prose for diatribe is biting and deeply truthful and there is no fat or fluff infused into these moments. Senna offers little resolution in this work as the identity by-products of multiracial or "new people" as Senna so refers changes with time both inward and outward and ever eludes the multiracial tweeter generation from which she and her characters issue forth from.

Rebecca Walker says

my dear friend danzy senna's brilliant follow-up to caucasia. deserved more notice than it received.

Titilayo says

as tragic mulatto stories go this one is pretty darn good. i was lulled into the twenty-something angst of a young woman trying to find herself after college. the situation is familiar; but, it was very apparent that the main character had some extra growing pains to contend with in this quick read. her narrator was steady. you share each moment of her life syllable by syllable as she accounts for life during her journalism internship. seems like a simple premise. about as simple as the invisible man emerging from his cave full of light bulbs!

as i read this story i was impressed. i kept hearing amiri baraka/the roots "there is something in the way of things" play as your eyes flow across the page. displacement. that is the boding feeling you get as you journey down the rabbit hole...Clotel meets Single White Female. yes it is that intense. the delivery of the conclusion is a bit weak, but the set up is beautiful. fifty pages in you are told: "learn your lessons early and you'll save yourself a lot of bullshit down the line."

page ninety seven: i would never do anything to jeopardize your fellowship. page one thirty three the narrator ends the chapter with a memory: "i sat digesting by the window, staring out at the freeway in the distance. that stream of lights and the deserted city streetsdescribed the world for me now, and not here, this bright full space of laughter and friends. this is the strange effect of getting lost. you become aware not so much of what is absent-all that is familiar and safe-but rather of what the familiarity has been keeping at bay: a world of strange shadows and cruel laughter, of odious companions just waiting for you to come out and play. and they know you will."

now all of this spaced out by some very odd things. there is talk of quadroons, porch monkeys, friendship, abandonment, family, failed relationships, being color struck and color fucked. its all very brilliant. everything leads you to ride a train of thought (especially when then narrator rides the train and talks about her reflection like its another person) that terminates at the traindepot of crazy white bitches!

Vanessa says

Interesting, interesting. Strikingly direct homage to Nella Larsen's *Passing*, another fascinating book about the fixation of one mixed-race woman with another, where the ability for a mixed woman to pass for white plays a key role, and which also eventually spirals into chaos and violence. Also from another angle reminded me of Ian McEwan's *Enduring Love* and Mary Gaitskill's *Veronica*, other books about obsession and loneliness. I think I saw this described as chick noir somewhere, and I think that's about right. It definitely manages to capture creepiness and psychological terror in a very effective way, which does not, I must say, lead to an especially comfortable or pleasant read. I also think the beginning is better and then it

kind of loses focus in the second half and gets more schlocky and noirish.

Also some good stuff about the beginning about the particular experience of the nameless narrator in being an educated, light-skinned woman of mixed race, and the particular sense of dislocation and isolation that causes here in various social situations. Some of that got heavy-handed quickly, though (thinking particularly of when the two women go get their "colors" taken. Okay, yes, we get it).

I do want to give a shout-out to my great friend Jon who bought me this book (and also bought me *At Swim, Two Boys*) for often pushing me to read books I probably would not otherwise seek out that deal with race and sexuality in bold and direct ways. I forget sometimes how influenced I am by the mainstream arbiters of quality in fiction and how much that means I don't always actively seek out this kind of subject matter. I don't think the writing in this book was amazing, but it's still interesting stuff, and I love seeing how it fits into the legacy of *Passing*, so I'm glad I read it. It's great to have reader friends who bring a different perspective to their recommendations.

Miss says

I'm surprised that none of the reviews I've looked at here have noted how this book is talking back to *Single White Female*. I thought it was pretty clearly alluding to the film, particularly with the way it echoes some scenes nearly word for word at the beginning (Greta asking if she's sure she won't be getting back together with Andrew). Like I think it would be pretty legit to describe it as *Single White Female* if race were the central feature. I also think the comparison explains the messiness near the end, like most everyone here I liked the beginning better but I was also expecting the melodramatic thriller turn of the second half. 3 stars

Latanya (CraftyScribbles) says

Tragic mulatto to the core. A homage, almost a dangerous plagiarism to Nella Larsen's *Passing*. I feel I'm watching a reboot, instead of an original work in some aspects.

We have this young woman in a new city, trying to create a new byway for what the life she may lead. She meets a young white man, Andrew, who she likes, not loves, and shares an apartment with. However, since she looks more white than black, he shows his true self at a party with his friends, and she realizes that his role in her life is not a destination, but a slot and a reason to move on to the next.

She meets a fellow black/biracial woman, albeit older, Greta and feels she has met a potential friend. Greta has a "connection" to an apartment (NYC is notorious for its apartment frenzy). Sometimes, gifts from people deserve no enjoyment as the main character finds out. While, she sorts out the spectacles life offers, Greta's chance to do is limited (albeit self-provided). The latter has had a harder look at how society sees her, which creates a madness shown later. Obsession is a word placed too kindly on how Greta feels towards the main character. She wants to live through the other, like a coat.

The main character's name never appears - she's nameless, faceless in a crowd of spectators with assigned traits and memberships she feels do not denote her life. But, what makes her different from Greta, is that she's not trying so hard for a labeling. She's willing to see where life takes her, knowing the journey doesn't end when wistful moments choose to do the same. Finding this out provides tragic (hence, the tragic mulatto cliché).

I try to keep away from such stories as they can be mind-numbing and eye-roll worthy. Mind you, my eyes rolled a few times, but so much as to keep me from finishing the story, which is fascinating. Biraciality, especially black and white, creates a complexity within the wrong hands sometimes. Greta's pair couldn't handle it, while the main character showed patience towards it.

Pros: Engrossing, a page-turner, good characters (Don't let your guard down when Greta comes around)

Cons: Short (once again, I think this is part of the homage to Ms. Larson)

No sophomore slump here. Senza created another story worthy of a reading.

Natlyn says

Senna does a wonderful job of capturing the thoughtless racial jibes and slurs to which those of visually indeterminate race are frequently subjected. However, while I think she is attempting to subvert the tragic mulatto stereotype, I'm not sure she does or rather I think she may have simply changed the manifestation of the tragic mulatto's condition. In any event, I'm not sure what I'm supposed to take away from this well written and crafted tale regarding how best to handle being of mixed race: stick with people who already know you for who you are? make friends with non-Americans? stay out of New York?

Actually I'm pretty sure Senna is saying none of those things. Rather she is using her craft to call attention to a symptom of America's skanky race issues. And I agree with that. It's just that a novel about it isn't for me.

Yet I do recommend it for people whose tolerance of mainstream literature is higher than mine. The characters and setup situations ring pitch perfect and the use of literary techniques are excellent.

Michelle says

This book is very strange. Not worth the time to write a review. Just say no...

Liana says

This book was structurally exquisite. Even though *Caucasia* is more well-known and has more interesting political/ historical tidbits, *Symptomatic* is more complex and mature. It reminded me of Conrad's *The Secret Sharer*: a choreographed literary dance as the unnamed protagonist painfully slowly comes to recognize elements of her possible future self in her doppelganger.

Sara says

i initially chose 2 stars, then thought about my initial review to jhumpa lahiri's "the namesake" and decided i didn't want to make the mistake again of comparing the second work by an author to the debut.

the first half showcases senna's strengths-- creating complicated characters who explore and explode race and racism. the second half wanders off and loses focus. but, even so, it's pretty good. i have to finish books i start reading, but if you are a person that doesn't have that compulsion, consider stopping half-way through. you will probably have a much higher opinion of "symptomatic" then.

Danyel says

I enjoyed this book. It got a lot of negative due to its "lack of depth" but it was still a very engaging and entertaining read. It came off a bit preachy and it lacked focus but the author does uncover something raw and painful surrounding issue of "bi-racial" identity.

Leslie says

This book itself is symptomatic of the "sophomore slump" faced by many young writers coming off unbridled success of a debut novel. Unoriginal, uninspired, and unrewarding, *Symptomatic* is nothing but an amateur suspense novel posing as "literature" under the cloak of its author's mature writing style.

Danzy Senna received well-deserved critical acclaim for her debut novel, *Caucasia*. This fascinating coming-of-age narrative tells the tale of two mixed-race sisters, Birdie and Cole, growing up in early 1970s Boston. Birdie, who looks white, is forced to go underground in the rural northeast with her white mother who has supposedly committed an activist-related crime, while Cole, who resembles her black father, heads to Brazil and ultimately Berkeley, CA with him. This original narrative invokes profound questions about our society's attitude and perception of race.

Unfortunately, the only resemblance that *Symptomatic* has at all to its predecessor is its recycled ideas, both character-wise and politically. The unnamed narrator is a 20-something year old up and coming journalist, who writes for a prominent New York City magazine on a fellowship. She, too, like Birdie and Cole, has a mixed-race identity as well as Birdie's tenous and uncomfortable attitude about it. Her apathetic parents and brother live in Berkeley, CA (sound familiar?) and have a 1970s "hippie" attitude about life. Through various circumstances, she befriends another worker at the magazine, a middle-aged woman who has been somewhat ostracized by the rest of the staff. Gradually, the woman's approach to the friendship becomes more and more disturbing, until it finally reaches a frenzied peak that ends in violence, death, and a plot twist that any attuned reader will see coming a mile away.

While the plot itself wants to be a psychological thriller, the bulk of the prose is devoted to the narrator's [i.e. Senna's] ruminations about race and class in society. When original, the narrator's commentary is ill-placed and directionless; when recycled from *Caucasia*, the commentary is poorly imitated and not fully articulated. One scene even uses an exact same game as *Caucasia*. In *Caucasia*, Birdie befriends a group of girls in New Hampshire who discuss what "season" Birdie should be in regards to clothing. Is she a winter, an autumn, a spring, or a summer? *Symptomatic* expands this discussion of season color-matching when the narrator's friend obsesses over the idea of "season" clothing matches to the point that she takes the narrator to a professional "colorist" who tells her that she is an autumn. This recycled storyline just makes the novel even less authentic than it already is.

The one thing that is somewhat redeeming about *Symptomatic* is its showcase of Senna's graceful writing style. The lucid quality of the narrator's perceptions lend credibility to even her weakest perceptions. Senna works well in first person, bestowing her narrators with keen eyes toward society that stem from a painful

self-awareness of their own "outsider" vantage point. While Symptomatic is indeed burdened with its own sickness of banality, Senna's strong writing talent assures me that, thankfully, it is not a chronic condition.
