

# Casts a weak spell

## THE WITCH

By Marie N'Diaye.  
MacLehose, ₹399

Cast as a “semi-failed witch” in Marie N'Diaye's International Booker-shortlisted novel, Lucie is a modestly mediocre heroine whose clairvoyant abilities only reveal indistinct details about persons or places. For instance, when she trains her Pierrot, her husband, abandons her, she can only tell that he had run away to his mother at Poitiers. But because he had quietly pocketed her inheritance, Lucie's witchy look compels her to follow him to a drab apartment in downtown Bourges. Once she meets him, bored and hapless amid his newly-acquired chaotic family, she knows that all is lost.

A failed wife who is tricked out of her inheritance, Lucie is relentlessly dogged by failures. Her dream project, of uniting her parted parents, collapses and the consequences of her failed venture make her realise that there can be “no sorrow deep enough to punish such a lack of talent”. Worse, when she turns her

mediocre talent to earning money in her friend's newly-set up university, she not only fails but is also arrested for being a “professional fake than a real witch”. At the very end, when the mother-in-law, while vacationing with Pierrot and his enlarged family, merrily asks Lucie about her “plans for the upcoming summer vacation”, the banality and the horror of her down-and-out situation are underlined.

With a focus on the ordinary, N'Diaye crafts an understated first-person narrative, which effectively brings out the disarray and the disjunction inside the family. Through Lucie's intimidated and baffled narration, we see two haughty daughters, a contemptuous husband, a reluctant mother, an untrustworthy father and an authoritarian yet defeated mother-in-law. The familial repression and indifference also include the husband's new spouse, a “beatific, broken woman”, and the “too long-winded” nesting partner of the mother. The collapse of domesticity and filiation engulfs Lucie's social world, evident in the abrasive neglect of her own child by her friend, Isabelle, and in the lunchtime rants about “violent husbands” and “children in foster



homes” that Lucie's fellow teachers frantically recount without listening. Funny, ironic and full of banalities and betrayals, *The Witch* provides a witty account of loss and abandonment, themes that strike at the heart of social relationships.

But if social realism is the point, then why the witchy factor? What explains the theme of the failed sorceress especially since Lucie doubts her gifts and says, “I was probably nothing more than a pathetic woman of a perfectly ordinary kind, abandoned, a fraud, like my fellow teachers, their faces worn down by drab torment, by mediocre calamity.”

Does N'Diaye deploy witchcraft and the supernatural as aesthetic tropes for heightening the banality of Lucie's suburban existence? But then why is Lucie weighed down by her impressive witchy genealogy in which her mother and her twin daughters are far more enterprising than she? Also, since Lucie successfully initiates her daughters into sorcery rites, is witchcraft grafted on to the themes of maternal powers and losses? As magic fiction which explores the limits of *petit-bourgeois* thinking and living with a witty and witchy take on womanhood, how successful is the novel?

Within N'Diaye's oeuvre, *The Witch* belongs to an older phase, to a time when young French writers actively reinvented new writerly modes in place of traditional novelistic strategies. *The Witch* demonstrates this innovative turn as Lucie's characteristic failures fit in with the experimental interest in the ordinary and her semi-failed sorcery aids an enigmatic mode of writing in which clusters of events remain puzzling and ambiguous. Lucie's portrayal also responds to the prevailing feminist reshaping of the maternal subject unhindered by traditional expectations. By making lacklustre Lucie the speaking centre of the tale and by ensuring that her narrative is not impeded by the loss of her witchy daughters, N'Diaye gathers several *avant-garde* strands along with her feminist interests. Together, they animate and explain the reasons for the book's inclusion in the International Booker shortlist. However, notwithstanding the outcome of the award, it is for the reader to decide whether the stylistic and the thematic features converge or whether dissonance lurks between the two.

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