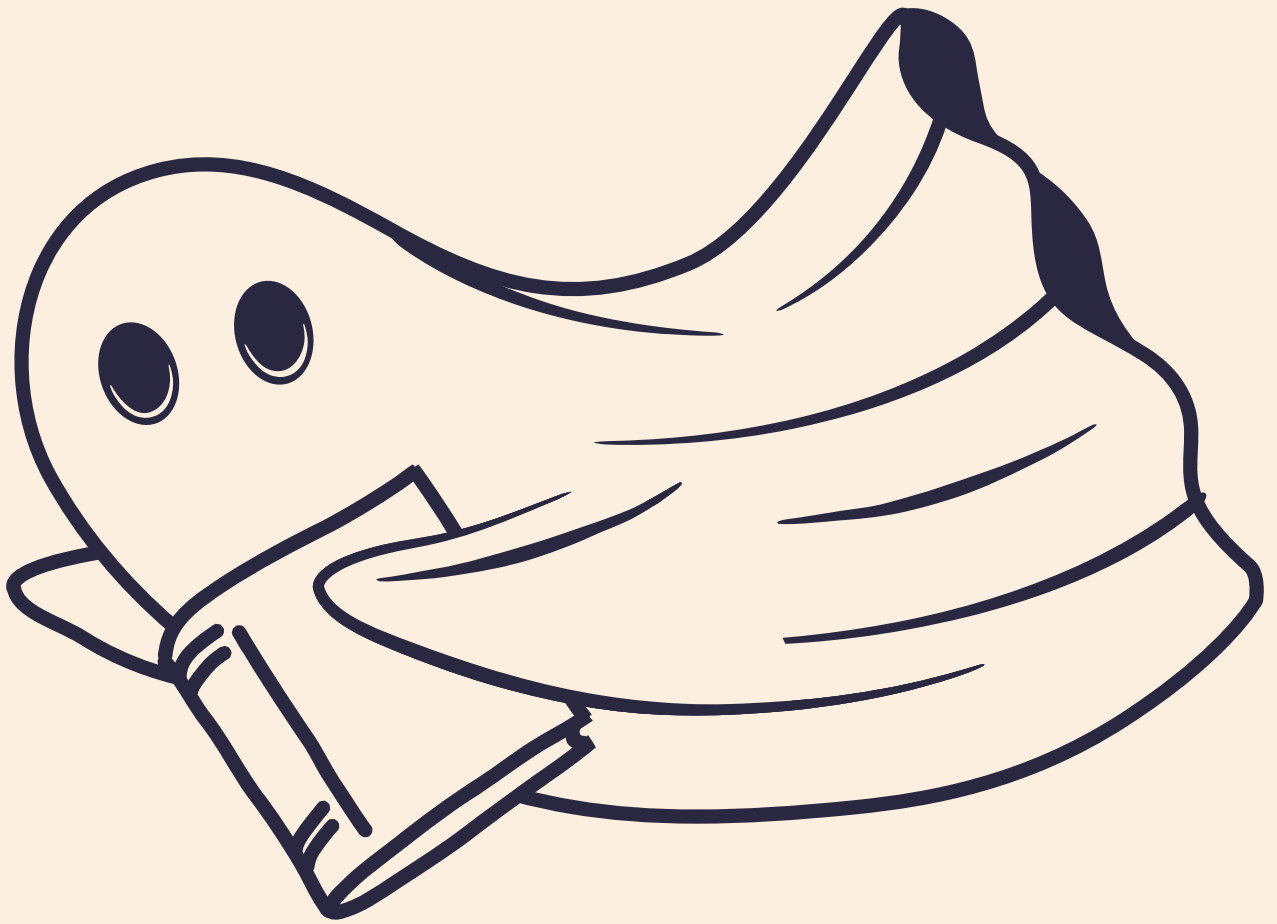


My Friends, the Ghoulish Librarians

BY NEWT ALBISTON

A love letter to the train-station little library, lesbian literature, and the imagined people who hand us stories when we need them the most.



THERE ARE GHOSTS IN the London Underground. The seats, forever furnished in questionably laundered carpet, have been privy to millions of rear ends. They may contain stories, or they may just hold a metric shit ton of dead skin. It's hard to tell because carpet doesn't have much to say, and the commuters that sit atop it are difficult to read. Their language is not one that you can learn with any kind of ease. It's signals and gestures and scrunched-up noses.

The ghosts pay no heed. London will eat you alive if you can't learn to live among them—that's why you'll rarely catch a story via the mouthpiece of a commuter. The ghosts, though? They truly have so much to tell you if you pay close enough attention.

I make it to Highgate station to catch my train at 8:45 on a Wednesday morning. I'm due at work by 9:30, but my train won't pull in for another four minutes at least. The station entrance by the coffee car has 14 steps down, and as the artificial wind from the underground batters my hair into knotty tendrils around my face, I make it to my favourite part of the morning routine.

Many stations in the city these days host "little free libraries." The first time I'd ever seen such a thing, I'd been walking from Westfield's Stratford branch to the Central Line platform to catch a train that would take me all the way back to my hometown. The little library played host to a series of religious books, but nothing that caught my fifteen-year-old eye. Nevertheless, I regarded it as something to keep a watchful eye on.

Once you've seen the first of these little book exchanges, you start to notice every one that you walk by. All over the Transport for London network, I would spot secondhand bookshelves taking up space next to the ticket gates, sometimes heaving with Danielle Steel titles and weight-loss guidebooks, sometimes empty save for one or two books in French. A printed, laminated sign encouraged commuters to take a book and/or leave a book.

It feels like the ultimate gift from a stranger. I am twenty-five and struggling to pay for groceries, but rich in literature. With my my various little library finds squeezing into my own personal collection, I manage to make space for each puzzle piece in the greater story of my city. Pencil marks in the front cover, business cards and receipts as bookmarks—one time, a preview copy of a book that had yet to be released. It's the least I can do, collecting each artefact as I go. I am a pirate, and I am looting the tiny ships that contain my primary interest. History is in a yellowed second-edition Zadie Smith, a highlighted copy of *Sense and Sensibility*.

My nan, ninety years old and still as curious as she had been when she was my age, likes to lament on how strangers refuse to speak to one another. It makes her sad. She doesn't know the conversations I've had with the anonymous donors of my extensive book collection, though. I like when the pages are damaged, when there are tears and curls. Isn't that a silent proclamation of love? It feels like it.

There's this stranger with whom I've had three such conversations now. The little library on my road is stationed outside of a fairly pedestrian house.

There's a rocking horse in the window, and a red leather sofa. The

little library is shaped like a birdhouse, or a small wooden cabin,

and has a little lock that you must turn in order to plunder the treasures. I think it's her—my stranger—who keeps leaving different Jeanette Winterson books on the shelves.

Winterson, a lauded lesbian fiction writer, felt like a very pointed choice to host in a little library. I took the first book, a copy of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*—Winterson's semi-autobiographical coming-out novel—and I devoured it in a matter of days. I'd been in a phase where my lifeline was reading, and if I was not reading, I was working. I hesitated to put the book back into the library when I was done with it. It felt like something to hang on to.



The next was a copy of *Written on the Body*, also by Winterson—a love story with an ambiguously gendered lead and a deep philosophical slant. It took me a total of twelve hours to read. I sat next to a friendly apparition on the Tube as I made it through the book, and wiped my tears with the sleeve of my jacket. I wondered again about who could have possibly left me these books. They were my imaginary friend, a confidante in whom I could bury my heart. *Written on the Body* hit me harder than *Oranges*. I hadn't known at the time that love was around the corner for me. There was a deeply spiritual romanticism to the text that I knew I understood, and wanted to understand. It felt as if the person I'd made up in my head had known I was coming that spring evening.

I wondered what she looked like, the (assumed) woman I imagined to be delivering these sacred texts. Were the books delivered by hand from her very own personal collection, or was she truly a ghost—had someone else left them in the library to be enjoyed by presently living beings? They weren't recent editions of the books, and the cover designs were so similar that they must have been from the same round of publication. Whoever my ghost was, I pictured her as an older butch woman. Maybe she had recently reached her fifties, celebrating the milestone in her second-story London flat. She lived with her partner, but they hadn't gotten married, for they didn't believe in the practice.

They walked their dog to and from the Alexandra Park farmers market on a Sunday morning. She'd grown up in South London but had relocated to the North for work back in the nineties. I wonder which bookshop she'd collected her Jeanette Winterson haul from, her arms full of passionate stories and profound declarations of love.

I hope that my ghostly butch is still with us. Maybe I'll come across her someday, opening the latch on the little library and rearranging the

donations to fit a well-read and well-loved copy of *Frankissstein*. I think that I would know it was her. I'd want to take her hands and tell her that she had changed me, just a bit. Enough to matter.

The last time I found one of her contributions to the library was late in the spring. *Sexing the Cherry*, an early Winterson book, sat in my bookbag for too long. I didn't like it. I wonder if my ghost had, or if it was the one piece of her haul that just did not sit quite right. It took me too long to read, and I don't really remember a single word of it. My imaginary ghost might have found more poetry within the text. We didn't have to agree on everything.

The gifts that ghosts bring cannot be taken for granted. They tuck and hide and

lurk in every corner of the city. I can't help but feel as if there's an element of fate when I make my little library choices. You have to be receptive, if you want to befriend the stories of the city. Whether they remain on the page or twist into reality is up to the reader.

It's summertime now, and I'm in a bookshop with my partner—the same love that was hiding around the corner. We're picking out books for one another, and I scour the shelves for some fiction that might interest her. A recent edition of *Written on the Body*, all modern and white as a seashell bleached by the sun, comes into my view. I buy it for her because I remember what a profound effect the text had on me, but I want to keep my own copy.

The ghosts chose me. She can get her bloody own. ■

Newt Albiston (They/Them) is not a paranormal specialist, but they are a writer based in London. They have written stories on pop culture, queerness, and belonging for a variety of publications, including *The Huffington Post* and *Them*. They are the uncle to a cat named Daisy, who has drooled at least a little bit on every book that they have read this year. You can find them on Instagram and X at @mossheadlives.

