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YouTube – August 2023 – The Echo Wife

Welcome back to Underground Bookshelf, my name is Laura, and today, we’re talking about *The Echo Wife* by Sarah Gailey. There will be spoilers in this video, so if you haven’t read this book, you may want to stop the video here, go read it, and come back. Some of the videos on this channel come from me just wanting to talk about books that I’ve read recently, but others, like the book we’re talking about today, are prescheduled. I’m considering those books part of our book club. The book roster for the rest of 2023 is posted to the channel, and I’ve added a link below in case you would like to read ahead. In case you’d like to prep for the Book of the Month for September, the book I have planned is *Bless Me Ultima* by Rudolfo A. Anaya.

Sarah Gailey is a Hugo Award Winning and Bestselling author of speculative fiction, short stories, and essays. They are nonbinary and use they/them pronouns. You can find their work at sarahgailey.com. Sarah’s second book, *When We Were Magic* was banned in a Texas school system in 2021 for its inclusion of magic. This is not uncommon. Magical fantasies are frequent targets of book challenges and bans in communities that fear that these stories will influence children to engage in occult or satanic practices. Next month’s book has been targeted for the same reasons. I think this is particularly unfortunate because it portrays actual customs of the Hispano culture, so the ban on that book limits dialogue about the folklore and practices of a real culture.

Anyway, neither of these books are what we’re talking about today. In this video, we are talking about one of Sarah Gailey’s science fiction books. *The Echo Wife* is a psychological thriller that takes the extramarital affair trope and gives it a strange, new twist. The protagonist, Evelyn, is a genetics researcher who devises a way to generate adult human clones. She is taken by surprise when her husband, Nathan, divorces her and moves in with his new fiancée, Martine. The bigger surprise, however, is that Martine is a literal clone of Evelyn. She discovers that Nathan had systematically feigned interest in Evelyn so that he could steal her genetics research and replicate it on his own. But the catch is that he doesn’t make Martine into an exact replica of Evelyn. He tweaks her genetic sequencing to make her more feminine, demure, and easy to control. So instead of making a perfect clone of his ex-wife, he creates his idea of a perfect wife and then gets her pregnant. It’s wild!

One day, he gets violent and attacks Martine, and she kills him in self-defense. She is so isolated that Evelyn is effectively the only other person Martine knows, so despite the weird history, she goes to Evelyn for help. They can’t come up with a way of explaining away the situation to the authorities, so they bury Nathan’s body in the backyard and make a clone of him in Evelyn’s lab. It turns out that they make a too-perfect clone of Nathan, because he returns to his abusive and negligent ways and Martine wishes more and more that she could escape him. One day, while gardening, Martine finds the unmarked graves of many other clones of Evelyn. She calls Evelyn and by studying his research journal, they discover that every time a clone becomes too self-determined for his liking, he kills it and makes a new one. By now, Martine has had her baby, so Evelyn devises a plan to get both Martine and the baby out of the house, just not at the same time. She and Martine dig up one of the clones, dresses it in Martine’s clothing and stage it in the house to appear as if Martine has died. Eventually, Nathan goes to Evelyn for help with the baby. They make a quiet arrangement for him to have visitation. To his knowledge, Evelyn raises the baby, but in actuality, she sends Martine and the baby to live in a house in the country.

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN

Okay, so we’ve touched on the basics of the plot. It’s a really fun book with lots of twists and turns. It’s a pretty easy and entertaining read and kind of gives me Michael Crichton, *Prey*, type vibes with the whole, science experiment gone wrong beach read. But the thing that gets me really excited about this book is how complex the women characters are. Evelyn is the clear protagonist with the story told from her perspective using first-person narrative. She’s ambitious, intelligent, hardworking, and diligent, but she’s also vindictive, impatient, and cold. She very nearly leaves Martine, who we as readers come to accept as a real person, in an abusive and potentially deadly relationship, just to hide the truth that the real Nathan is dead and has been replaced with a clone. When she gets tired of hosting Martine while they wait for the new Nathan to give them the baby, Evelyn confides to the reader just how tiresome she finds dealing with Martine’s emotional state.

“I will not pretend that it did not occur to me to kill her. I have wished, in the time since then, that there was any way for me to get credit for dismissing that notion out of hand.”

Evelyn is selfish and unsympathetic toward Martine even after Martine leaves her baby behind to escape Nathan’s abuse. Everything she does to help Martine comes with a less than healthy dose of irritation.

“I resented her more than I can say. I had rescued her. I had helped her get away with murder, and I had gotten her a clean escape from Nathan, and every time she drifted into a room I was occupying, with that lost look on her face, there was something in me that could only hiss the word “ungrateful” over and over again until I could think of a task to occupy her. It was as though she missed her baby too much to even see the magnitude of work I had taken on to help her, the amount of risk.”

On the other hand, we can be sympathetic to Evelyn because Martine’s very existence is an affront to her. Martine isn’t just the other woman, she is literally Evelyn – if Evelyn’s genes had been expressed in slightly different ways – all because Nathan loved and wanted Evelyn, but not as herself, only in his idealized version of her.

Evelyn also represents women in STEM. At a black-tie event celebrating her contributions to science, men consistently ask her questions that imply that they worry she didn’t consider developmental stages intrinsic to her work.

“’But aren’t you concerned about the developmental mottling of the limbic system in early stages?’ This question from a man in rimless glasses and a wrinkled suit, another person I’d never met before. I fielded the question as if I didn’t chafe at the implications of such a basic objection to my methods. *No, you asshole*, I did not say, *it never occurred to me to keep an eye on the fucking limbic system, what a breakthrough, here, take my grant money*.

Poise. Patience. Be nice, Evelyn.”

Moments like this one are snuck into the story naturally, in a way that reflects how a woman’s competence, even in her field of expertise, is often called into question in a way that a man’s competence is not.

REPRESENTATION OF MINORITIES

So, the one character I can recall who we might consider a minority is Seyed, who is Evelyn’s research assistant. He doesn’t really have any backstory but based on his name, we can guess that he is probably Arabic. He starts out as a pretty likeable character who’s very competent in his lab work but also someone that Evelyn genuinely enjoys working with. When she and Martine show up at her lab in the middle of the night, she finds out that Seyed has been stealing materials and data from Evelyn’s lab and selling them to her ex-husband. She loses all her faith in him but waits to fire him until she’s done growing Nathan’s clone, because she needs the help and can’t risk a new assistant discovering her secrets.

I think there are ways that Seyed is relatable. He fits the vibe of a millennial just trying to hustle their way to paying off their mountain of student loans. We kind of risk letting him fall into the list of Middle Eastern villains. A lot of stories written in the US reflect perceptions of the time and place. There are many German villains like Captain America’s nemesis, the Red Skull, born out of World War Two and Russian villains, Boris Badenov and Natasha Fatale from "The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle" coming out of increasing tensions between the US and Russia. In more recent years as the US has warred in the Middle East, we’ve seen a lot more Middle Eastern villains. Because Seyed is the only notable character of minority status in the book AND he betrays the protagonist, Evelyn, he kind of risks being added to the list. But, he is remorseful and really only fell into his bad actions at the insistence of Nathan, so I think he kind of avoids this status by being used by the main villain of the story.

Overall, this was a pretty entertaining book. It was refreshing to read some complex women characters who had their flaws, strengths, goals, and interests just like real women. It explores questions of self-determination and free will through the lens of gene expressions and scientific exploration. I enjoy the author’s writing style, it’s a really quick read, and look forward to adding more of Sarah Gailey’s books to my bookshelf.

Thanks for joining me for this video. You’ll be able to find links to my sources and to more about this book in the description below. Other things you can find in the description include the link to read the script from this video, the link to the Underground Bookshelf website, my own book. Underground Bookshelf Patreon and the merch store. You can support this project for free by liking and subscribing, by following Underground Bookshelf on social media, reading the stories and using the resources on the website, watching our videos or by submitting your own short stories to be included in our collection.

Before signing off, my question for the comments is: What is a book that you can’t get off your mind?

Thanks again, I’ll see you next time and remember, wherever you are, when you’re here in the Underground Bookshelf space, YOU BELONG.

YouTube/TikTok Clips:

The Echo Wife is a psychological thriller that gives the extramarital affair trope a science fiction twist. It asks the question: “What would you do if you found out that your ex left you for your clone?”

The Echo Wife explores self-determination and free will through the lens of gene expression and scientific discovery. It has complex women characters and discusses oppression of women by twisting the trope of the wronged woman on its head.

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