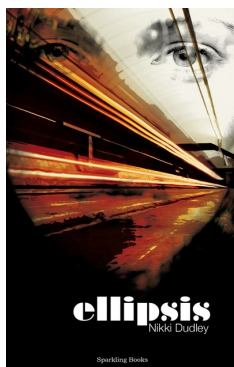


Ellipsis



Ellipsis is a disturbing thriller stemming from what is left unsaid, what bounces around in the mind and evaporates when trying to remember. Can there be a conclusion when no-one seems to know the truth?

By Nikki Dudley

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Nikki is managing editor of streetcake magazine and also runs the streetcake writing prize and MumWrite. She has a chapbook and collection with KFS. She is the winner of the Virginia Prize 2020 for her second novel.

About the book

“Right on time,” Daniel Mansen mouths to Alice as she pushes him to his death. Haunted by these words, Alice becomes obsessed with discovering how a man she didn’t know could predict her actions. On the day of the funeral, Daniel’s cousin, Thom, finds a piece of paper in Daniel’s room detailing the exact time and place of his death.

As Thom and Alice both search for answers, they become knotted together in a story of obsession, hidden truths and the gaps in everyday life that can destroy or save a person.

Reviews

“It’s a tale that will keep them wondering, gasping, thinking, smiling, grimacing, rereading. What more can a reader ask for?” - *Spinetingler Magazine*

“I wouldn’t have stopped reading if my house was on fire!” - *Cas Peace*

“Tight, evocative gut-punches tempered by the desperate details of everyday life” - *Shaun Kupfer, author of White Male, 34*

“This is the type of story that keeps the reader up half the night” - *Maureen Vincent-Northam, author of ‘The Writer’s ABC checklist’, Hereford*

“The pacing is excellent, the characters fragile, flawed and consumed with grief and guilt. I could not recommend this book enough.” - *Review posted on goodreads.com*

“An intriguing, satisfying read” - *David Hebblethwaite*

“Ellipsis is a very stylish, compelling read that will stay with you for a long time, and Sparkling Looks have very much lived up to their name in their presentation of this title. Nikki Dudley has a burgeoning literary career that should go on from strength to strength following the publication of the magnificent Ellipsis. I look forward to reading more works by this great writer.” - *Kevin Mahoney, Authortrek.com*

“Exciting, psychologically complex, and disconcerting, it is a powerful tale of two misfits trying to uncover long hidden secrets about themselves and their pasts. Dudley has an often startling eye for description and her simple poetic prose will delight readers looking for something slightly different in the crime thriller genre.” - *Sam Ruddock, Writers’ Centre, Norwich*

“This is a work of literacy .. the pleasure is in the writing style” - *The Truth About Books*

Excerpt

1 Red Snake

I chose him because of the red scarf.

My palms sweat. Dirt from the walls is smudged across them and slithers in the folds. There is a faint smell of kebab in the air and an excited murmur moving down the platform like Chinese whispers. I wonder how distorted the message will be by the time it reaches my end.

Can you hear it too, Mum? Do you think they’re whispering about me?

There are other scarves too, red and white combined and I guess that a football game must have taken place. Yet, his scarf is different. It is pure red, the red people affix to the badge of fiery passion, the badge of cold-blooded murder, without the interludes of white to dull its beauty.

He is unique. I’ve watched him for weeks now and the time has finally arrived. The clock says 15:32 as casually as ever but it secretly signals to me: this is the correct time. It is not destiny; it is careful planning and the instinctual knowledge inside.

Mum, this is the moment.

Now, my breath barely disturbs the stillness of the cavern the swarm of strangers are gathered in, all awaiting the rush of wind that will open up the arteries, revive us. Everybody appears lost, shuffling on their feet, staring at the same grotesquely large posters until they become less overpowering, fiddling with buttons, holding their phones and longing for reception. Anything to avoid eye contact.

My favourite moment is the shared objective, the upraised eyes facing the same direction, the temporary and forced community as the wind invites the dusty air to dance, flings the litter in celebration. All I can do to keep calm is count the seconds down in my head. Even when I think of you, you are bouncing in my mind.

The only details I know about him have been gathered through observation from afar. This is actually the closest I have been to him in three weeks. From here, I can smell his sweat weaving with his aftershave. I can also see how he has missed a belt loop and a tiny bald patch in the back of his hair, perhaps where he has a birthmark.

Are you excited too, Mum? I know you’ve been thinking about him when we’ve been trying to sleep. Now, we’re so close...

He is reading one of those trashy papers that have stormed the city. The wires of his iPod headphones are coming out of his ears and snaking down his chest to his jacket pocket. If he knew what is about to happen, would he change the song he is listening to, faintly nodding his head, and not struggling to remember the throwaway words? Would he fling down that paper and rush off to buy his favourite book?

It is the scarf that ensnared me. I had been wandering the streets three weeks before, in another dimension of thought or nowhere at all. Then, it flashed at me, like a camera suspending a

moment in time. It is a snake that has coiled around my attention and shot its venom into my blood. I latched onto the scarf and followed it all the way home. The rain tried to bully my eyes closed but I stood firm, keeping them set on the scarf weaving through the grey world. When he reached his house, I stood outside for another half an hour, smiling, pouring with gratitude.

Since then, he has been my daily plot. Today, he has thrown his scarf on haphazardly, perhaps being late or not wearing it for warmth but simply out of habit. I can only guess who bought it for him. His girlfriend? His mother? An old friend or relative who put no thought into a present for him? Or perhaps he chose it himself and red is also his favourite colour.

Despite following him, I recall very little about his appearance and when I try to remember three days later, I won't have a clue. I can guess that he has black hair but then I can also guess it is blond. I can say he's short or maybe tall. I can say he is black, white or Asian. Yet the fact is; I haven't paid attention. When the photo appears in the paper, I will look on it as fresh-eyed as everybody else.

What I remember most is a sense of him, a presence. He is like a positive image in a photograph where the rest has been inverted. Even more peculiar is the sense that he is aware. Sometimes I have caught him pausing in the street, as though to let me catch up. Another time, when he was trying on clothes, he seemed to single me out in the mirror and mentally ask my opinion.

The countdown begins to flash: ****STAND BACK TRAIN APPROACHING****. My chest implodes and the rest of my body springs alive. All I hear is a harmony of sounds: beating inside and the roar of the train.

Step forward.

Peer into dark.

Wind hisses at hot skin.

Folding newspapers.

Roar gallops in heart.

Eyes of light emerge.

Monster creeps closer.

A unison of feet.

Red scarf flutters.

Spring forward.

Head slightly turns.

Outstretched arms connect.

Eyes of train wide.

Mouths silent words.

Falling.

Newspaper flailing.

Reach out.

Touch the scarf.

Train screeches.

Screaming.

Monster engulfs.

Faces press up to windows.

Scarf a ball in fist.

I breathe. Stop. Think: Right on time. As he fell, his lips moved in the shape of these words: Right on time. Right on time. Right. On. Time.

Mum, did you see?

2 The Phone Call

At 15:32 a day later, Thom Mansen stops. He drops his pen as though it has stung him. He pushes away from the desk and stretches his legs. He doesn't pick up the phone even though it cries out. He stops and cannot find a place to start again.

He wonders what his boss would say if he went to his office and said, "I've stopped and I can't begin again". Would he himself be able to explain this? He doubts it. He doesn't feel hungry yet, he doesn't need to piss, and life is unusually 'fine'. In fact, his boss even suggested a promotion might be in the works and he hasn't argued with his girlfriend in months.

So he is lost.

Perhaps he has some rotting disease that works its way to the surface inside out and that's why he feels strange. Perhaps his heart has stopped and he has unknowingly passed into death at his desk whilst helping Mrs Rayder understand that her policy does not cover the death of her beloved tomcat, Bubbles.

He laughs into the air. "Shit", he mumbles, knowing it's entirely possible for this to be the case. Yet, hearing his own voice reassures him that he is still in a physical realm of existence, not in a twisted form of limbo where everything is similar to the life he has been leading up to this point.

The pen lies on the pile of paperwork. He stares, narrows his eyes, screams at his hand to move forward a few inches and clutch it. But his hand ignores him. His eyes begin to ache and tire in their sockets. He closes them for a few moments and reopens them.

Yet, he still doesn't move. He begins to panic and thinks he's having a stroke or an unworldly force is possessing him. But he knows he has to meet Emma later at the restaurant. Will he make it? Will his body simply imprison him here throughout the night? He would much rather be with Emma, having sex, talking about nothing.

He sees the light of the phone glaring at him. There are incoming calls on four lines. He is sure one of them is the old man who phones every day, pretending to ask questions about his housing policy, but in reality just wanting to connect with another human being. Apart from that, it could be any one of the thousands of customers, waiting to chew an ear off.

"Come on Thom, get yourself together!" He shakes out his shoulders. He smiles at his progress

and prepares to get back to his day. However, he now finds he has no desire to pick up the pen, to continue signing the rejections on policies, to hear another customer saying “of course I read the fine print” when they haven’t, to continue in any way at all.

He goes through every part of his job specification in his mind and cannot put a tick by any of the duties. He watches the other people walking by his office through the glass, like a helpless goldfish not functioning at the same level or speed. They are all busy – moving papers, picking up phones, and chatting about who’s shagging who this week. What is stopping him from doing the same?

He imagines if any of them cared enough to notice him, what they would see. A man, who is clean-shaven, has straight and recently cut brown hair (which curls at the sides if he doesn’t monitor it), a straight tie, a dribble of ink trailing from his lip that he doesn’t know about. Thom complies with every rule about uniform in the employee’s handbook; he is the physical representation of company policy. Would they know he hasn’t moved for five minutes? Would they assume he has been working up until the moment they happened to glance in?

Although his body is functioning again, Thom’s mind is suddenly heavy. His head drops into his chest like his neck has dissolved. A depression pulses through him, makes his chest rise and fall in a pitiful sigh, makes his body sprawl out on the desk like a person who has just suffered a heart attack. He watches his breath make a mist on the wooden face of the desk.

Abruptly, the phone stops wailing. Then ten seconds later, it rings again.

He grabs hold of the receiver. He balances it on his face which is still flat against the desk and awkwardly muffles, “Hello. Thomas Mansen”.

“Thom. It’s Richard”.

Thom shoots up as though someone has electrocuted him. “Rich, what’s going on?” It’s the voice... He can tell from the first syllable, the downward direction of the tone.

Richard delays, his breathing heavy for a moment. “Thom... it’s about Daniel”. Thom is sure Richard is crying, or perhaps he has a cold. “He’s dead”. Crying, then.

“What?” Thom stutters, then again, “what?”

“He fell under a train. Yesterday”. Richard’s words are so direct, poisoned darts that keep hitting him. Thom’s chest starts to tighten; his bones are shrinking like clothes washed at the wrong temperature. “I’m sorry I didn’t call earlier. Aunty didn’t take it well, obviously... I had to call the doctor”, Richard adds, making Thom feel like he has been squeezed out of his body and now lingers somewhere above the desk, not knowing the way back in. He needs to get to Aunty Val.

“Oh”, is all Thom says.

And then he listens to Richard, talking about the funeral, an inquest, the reading of the will and asking can he come and can he bring Emma, and Aunty Val would’ve called herself but she is still crying, and she needs him there. Tonight.

3 The Note

Highbury and Islington station. 15:30 Sunday.

It is Daniel’s handwriting. Thom recognises the way Daniel crosses his Ts with slanted lines, the way the top of his zeros never quite meet. Not meet, met. Daniel won’t be in the present tense

anymore.

At this, the note in Thom's hand starts to shake and he buckles onto the bed.

Thom supposes he should know better than to snoop in Daniel's things. Looking in Daniel's possessions is similar to how it had been trying to relate to him in life. Thom feels like he is swimming against the current and he has found a small piece of flotsam, but it instantly falls apart. This note could be written in Chinese, for all the sense it made.

There are so many drawers in Daniel's room, small ones for tiny secrets, large ones with small compartments inside; large ones ordered in such a way that no one would dare touch a thing. Thom can smell Daniel's authority. Invisible foot soldiers are standing guard around the room, willing to die in order to protect his classified information.

Yet here Thom is, having been compelled by the only drawer half open, like a partly opened wound. He shouldn't be in here anyway, as Aunt Val and Richard haven't even managed to open the door a crack. He is trespassing because he knows Daniel won't be able to stop him. He wants to see the magician's secrets that have bemused him for so long. He has poked around in this drawer and his hand has seemingly come out dripping with blood and sticky with pus, and all he wants to do is stuff everything back inside and close it up.

He refocuses on the note.

This is the time and place he died.

Thom shivers and tosses the note away at the thought. Yet moments later, he slowly leans closer to it and re-reads it at least ten times. He is a mouse tiptoeing around a mousetrap.

What do these words mean? Was Daniel meeting someone? And were they involved with his death? Was it suicide even? Or is this merely a coincidence that he wrote down this time and place, when they just so happened to denote almost to the minute, his death?

Thom feels his stomach groaning in part shock and part confusion. He rushes to the toilet and vomits. This has happened before, only a few times in his life – well, the worst times if he is honest. However, although he has clearly vomited up most of his breakfast, the questions remain inside Thom, like ulcers, nagging and ugly. He washes out his mouth with cold water and makes his way back to Daniel's room.

The note is still there. Thom doesn't know why the note shouldn't be there still, but perhaps he would prefer it to disappear; leave him alone to be sad about Daniel. The last thing he needs is more questions. Whenever somebody dies, there are enough questions anyway. All he can think about is the last time he'd been in the hold of this endless interrogation, when he'd just turned twelve, and both his parents hadn't come home. He'd vomited then too. A few times in fact.

Oddly enough, this room is where Thom was transported that night. He vaguely recalls Aunt Val kissing him goodnight whilst Daniel watched from the doorway, having been evicted for the night to the sofa. Thom felt unsettled then by the clatter of the railway that ran behind the house, but over the course of his adolescence it became as natural as birdsong.

In this moment however, the sound of the railway makes him feel nauseous. Although thankfully, he has nothing left to eject. He looks down at his suit and, seeing a vomit stain on his left cuff, rubs at it anxiously. If he turns up at Daniel's funeral covered in vomit, surely he may as well smear it over the coffin. After all, they were more than just cousins, yet not quite brothers.

Now that Thom thinks properly, he wishes he had known Daniel as well as he did Richard. Although, he and Daniel were the same age and even shared the same birthday, it seems these things merely gave them more reason not to bond. Instead, as soon as Thom arrived after his

parents' deaths, he and Richard, who was two years older, fell into a closer friendship.

Thom tried with Daniel, yet Daniel didn't seem interested. Whenever Thom pictures their shared birthday parties, Daniel is set back in some way, a step further from the table where everyone was singing 'happy birthday' or at Christmas, Daniel waited until everyone else had torn at their presents frantically and only then, he carefully chose one to begin with.

And what is the last thing he had said to Daniel? He searches through his memory and can only come up with a brief conversation at Richard's last birthday party. Daniel was standing by the front door. They exchanged pleasantries about general health and jobs. And what is it that Thom said to him? His last proper words to his cousin; face to face?

"Daniel, do you know where Aunty Val is?"

"In the kitchen". He nods towards the house. His smile acknowledges what they both feel; a need to find an exit as fast as possible, a sad knowledge that they will never linger with each other.

"Thanks. Speak later".

Yet Thom didn't speak to him later. And he never would again.

Thom wishes now he had tried harder. If not to be closer to him in life but for this moment, in order to understand this note, to understand why Daniel had written it so precisely and had left it in the only half-open drawer in the room, as if he knew...

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