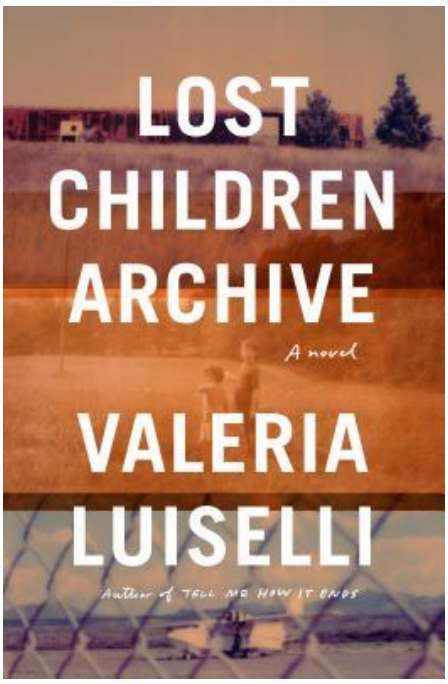

Lost Children Archive

Valeria Luiselli

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From the two-time NBCC Finalist, a fiercely imaginative novel about a family's summer road trip across America--a journey that, with breathtaking imagery, spare lyricism, and profound humanity, probes the nature of justice and equality in America today.

A mother and father set out with their kids from New York to Arizona. In their used Volvo--and with their ten-year-old son trying out his new Polaroid camera--the family is heading for the Apacheria: the region the Apaches once called home, and where the ghosts of Geronimo and Cochise might still linger. The father, a sound documentarist, hopes to gather an "inventory of echoes" from this historic, mythic place. The mother, a radio journalist, becomes consumed by the news she hears on the car radio, about the thousands of children trying to reach America but getting stranded at the southern border, held in detention centers, or being sent back to their homelands, to an unknown fate.
But as the family drives farther west--through Virginia to Tennessee, across Oklahoma and Texas--we sense they are on the brink of a crisis of their own. A fissure is growing between the parents, one the children can feel beneath their feet. They are led, inexorably, to a grand, unforgettable adventure--both in the harsh desert landscape and within the chambers of their own imaginations.
Told through the voices of the mother and her son, as well as through a stunning tapestry of collected texts and images--including prior stories of migration and displacement--*Lost Children Archive* is a story of how we document our experiences, and how we remember the things that matter to us the most. Blending the personal and the political with astonishing empathy, it is a powerful, wholly original work of fiction: exquisite, provocative, and deeply moving.

Lost Children Archive Details

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From Reader Review Lost Children Archive for online ebook

Alex says

LONGLIST FOR WOMEN'S PRIZE FOR FICTION

BOOK 9 OF 16 OF LONGLISTED TITLES

I had thought Colson Whitehead's THE NICKEL BOYS had firmly ranked itself as the top book of 2019 and lo and behold Valeria Luiselli came swooping in the very next novel and challenged for the crown with her absolutely remarkable LOST CHILDREN ARCHIVES, a timely depiction of the migrant crisis through the eyes of a family taking a road trip from New York City to Arizona.

In some ways this book is hard to describe or to summarize in a few sentences, because there is so much going on above and below the surface. Up front we are placed in car journeying south, a husband and wife in the front, in the back two children, each parent having brought a child to the marriage. Told through the voice of the wife, we quickly become attuned to the sad fate that waits the end of this road trip, a family whose time has come to an end, a relationship appearing to fail as each party discovered they want to explore different professional goals.

But this basic structure is filled in with the most astounding details that shape the story as it moves forward. The husband and wife met several years before working on a sound project that New York University had commissioned to record all the languages spoken in the city. The documenting of sound is given life, we are given exact details of the mechanics of the process as well as the meaning the partnership gives to what they are doing. As the project winds down, the husband and wife become determined to further the documentation of sounds, the former wanting to record the echos of now gone Apache warriors that once dominated the southwestern territories of the United States and the latter keen of giving voice (or recording voices) of child migrants caught in the harsh and merciless immigration system.

As the family travels south, both parents knowing their union may be at an end, the soundscape of the car ride is filled with the father's stories of Apache warriors, age inappropriate audiobooks the children must listen to and radio broadcasts of the migration crises, filled with stories of children who have attempted the border crossing on their own only to be detained and now face the prospect of deportation back to countries whose violence threatens their survival. The mother, whose New York friend has had her two daughters detained and have gone missing during a transfer from one institution to another, is now intent on not only documenting the lost children but finding these two girls.

Midway through the book, Luiselli shifts perspective, giving voice to the ten year old son, whose adolescent mind has absorbed and reinterpreted the stories coming from the front of the car, producing bizarre understandings of the reality that in itself is horrific and bizarre, but has become the normal for the adults. The boy slowly begins to recognize the impending end of his family and decides he must try to act in some way to impress his step mother, making a decision to run away with his five year old sister in search of the two lost girls his mother is intent on finding. The final third of the book becomes a harrowing descent into an unknown territory as the two children themselves become lost and their voices facing the threat of becoming another echo, their story another tragedy to be archived.

Luiselli is a skilled crafter of prose, her sentences filled with detail and specificity, yet beautiful in a precise but also meandering way. She captures intimate details of the characters lives and perspectives, all the while

articulating the broad ideas and contemplations of the various narrators. But most striking here is her use of a plethora of literary texts, music, photography and other medium to inform the narrative, to provide background to the characters and also understand their actions as their world is about to change drastically. Each chapter begins with an opening of an archival box the family brings with them, containing works of literature, academic texts, musical scores, that not only tells their research project but become integrated into the plot of the book. She quotes passages, lyrics and even creates a fictional book within a book, Elegies of Lost Children, itself a literary allusion to other works that have sought to detail experiences of "voyages, journeying, migrating."

Some have criticized this technique as pretentious (see Mercedes Bookish Musings quite harsh and I'd contend unfair review) and I will admit that in other cases I do get annoyed with writing that seeks to name drop works of literature for the sake of bragging, An Unnecessary Woman comes to mind. But in this case, Luiselli is not trying to merely show off her incredible grasp of literature, but instead alludes and quotes to further the goals of the text in a way that is organic. As she notes in the Works Cited section after the text of the novel:

...references to sources--textual, musical, visual, or audio-visual--are not meant as side notes, or ornaments that decorate the story, but function as intralinear markers that point to the many voices in the conversation that the book sustains with the past.

Far from showy decoration, these references become powerful components of the text, serving the narrative, acting as echoes from the past that the present must confront. Just one example that many have cited, is the first line from Cormac McCarthy's The Road, which is repeated often as the audiobook player manages to default to it whenever the mother turns on the radio:

When he woke in the woods in the dark and cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him.

This chilling line is not there for show but serves as a foreshadow, as a constant worry of losing ones child, as a warning of potential dangers that await the young siblings. For me, this is not pretentious but an amazing sculpting of literary works to inform the narrative purposes of this novel. That Luiselli does this so well, uses these texts or other media to build an archive of this family that touches upon so much beyond their own compelling drama is one of the reasons this book is a thing of beauty.

A more concerning critique is the question of cultural appropriation and how Luiselli uses the story of the Apache to further her own story telling goals. Some have noted that this falls into the trope of treating indigenous voices as unable to speak for themselves, reinforces a narrative of victimhood and denies agency to a population that continues to rightfully insist on self-determination. In LOST CHILDREN ARCHIVE, Luiselli gives the father, a Mexican American, full control over the story of the Apache, which leaves us to consider the problematics associated with this narrative decision. However, I don't believe that Luiselli is oblivious to the problems with this decision. In several interviews she discusses issues of appropriation and who has the right to tell other's stories and notes that the heart of the LOST CHILDREN ARCHIVE is asking the question of where do we stand when archiving the experiences of political violence. In this case, the pressing political violence Luiselli wants to document is that of Central American child migrants and she uses analogous histories of disappearance that Native Americans have experienced to emphasize the echoing of experiences across large swaths of time. That she chooses to have those comparative experiences channeled through the voyeuristic eyes of the father is a question worth debating but a debate that I would imagine Luiselli welcomes. That other indigenous authors, such as Tommy Orange, have effusively praised the book's treatment of transcending historical experiences, signals to me that it is not so easy to condemn

Luiselli's choice as a sloppy or disrespectful act of cultural appropriation.

If anything, I'd suggest the level of discussion and grappling with this text speaks to how powerful a statement it is. Beautifully written, densely packed with ideas, timely as ever, Luiselli has offered us an utterly important novel, one that asks how and where we stand as millions of migrants move around the world, looking for safe passage but met with cold rejection if not brutal violence. To have tackled such big issues through the lens of a modest road trip story speaks to how fantastic a writer Luiselli is. This will be one of the big books of 2019 and beyond and hope it gets its proper due critically and beyond.

Sam says

Luiselli changes her narrator halfway through this novel and that change made the difference in my appreciation of the novel. The author strains a little at times but overall this was a bold attempt.

Perry says

Marvelous, if not plagued by familiar MFA-grad malady

Excellently written, thought-provoking [3.8*] tale about deported (and lost) children. The narrative goes between a 30-something woman and her 10-year-old stepson as they and her husband and her 5-year-old daughter (husband's stepdaughter) travel from NY to AZ. The novel is interspersed with stories about deported children and the Apache tribe of native Americans, and is, unsurprisingly, peppered with scathing commentary on past and current U.S. immigration policies.

Unfortunately, the book seems plagued by the familiar MFA-grad malady: the novel's pristine sentences travel well in the clever construction of a *good to admirable to really good* novel... that ails from a deficiency in real ambition--avoiding risk-taking ensures a novel proofed to ridicule by peers--and a seeming shortage of existential authenticity.

By the end, I found this novel edifying but thought it lacked the primary colors and subtle shading that transform fiction into a transcendent work of art: those exposing the interstices of the human condition.

Sarah says

Easily one of the best books I have ever read. I marvel at the brain that pieced this together; the planning and research to deftly include so many cultural references in a book about one of the great humanitarian crises in our history. The characters are pitch-perfect: the children believable, distinct, thoughtful, funny. The parents are frustrated, trying, failing, trying more, selfish, loving. The weave of the family narrative with the details of Geronimo and the Apaches, and the stories of the lost refugee children, is seamless. I can find no fault with this novel, other than the fact that is over and I can never again experience it for the first time. An immediate favorite, a book I will recommend forever and reread often.

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peg says

Longlisted for the 2019 Women’s Prize. Have just finished this book and am overwhelmed with thoughts! The first part was excelllent in a slow and descriptive way, to be followed by a dynamic second half that I literally could not put down until finished....WHEW!

Stephanie Jane (Literary Flits) says

See more of my book reviews on my blog, Literary Flits

After almost completely immersing myself in Lost Children Archive over three days and loving every single minute of Luiselli's atmospheric novel, I went online to update my Goodreads and was curious to see how many other reviewers weren't breathlessly fangirling. Did I not read the same book as everyone else? I was so completely drawn in to this story that I often felt as though I was right there in the car, in the midst of this fractured family. Luiselli doesn't name any of the central four characters so, while we come to know them as distinct individuals, there is also a sense that they could represent any and every family. What they have is each other which is more than can be said for the Lost Children of the title - two South American sisters making their torturous way north alongside thousands of other desperate children. In Luiselli's novel, these children are allowed to shout their names while our road-tripping family do not, reversing the real-life situation where the Americans would be named and the Latina travellers anonymous.

I know I missed most of Luiselli's myriad literary references as I don't have her encyclopedic knowledge, but I don't think this was actually a problem. To the contrary, in fact. I might have been led to appreciate more layers within this onion of a novel, but by perpetually book-spotting, I would have missed out on the carefully constructed atmosphere which amazed me. Parallel narrative threads explore historical migrations through Pa's interest in now-lost free Apache culture, while Ma concentrates her focus on present day child migrants. Unusually for a novel, much of the description relates to soundscapes and noise, or the lack of it. Both parents obsessively document their journey by way of sound recordings so we get to 'hear' the vast, empty land they pass through. I am more used to written descriptions exploring visual scenery so this aural approach appealed to me.

Aspects of Lost Children Archive that I especially loved were diversions into stream of consciousness narration, stories within stories that mirrored and developed each other, circular themes and revisiting scenes from different points of view, and a constant unsettling sense of foreboding which isn't openly discussed by the characters, but came from outside the novel by way of my awareness of what is actually happening to these children's real life counterparts in America right now. I became strongly emotionally invested in this book resulting in quite an emptiness when I came to the final page. I can understand why other readers might not be as enthusiastic about Lost Children Archive, but it was a perfect read for me.

Paul Fulcher says

Longlisted for the 2019 Women's Prize and a strong contender to win

Whenever the boy and girl talk about child refugees, I realize now, they call them “the lost children.”I suppose the word “refugee”is more difficult to remember. And even if the term “lost”is not precise, in our intimate family lexicon, the refugees become known to us as “the lost children.”And in a way, I guess, they are lost children. They are children who have lost the right to a childhood.

If they hadn’t gotten caught, they probably would have gone to live with family , gone to school , playgrounds, parks. But instead, they’ll be removed, relocated, erased, because there’s no place for them in this vast empty country.

In 2014, Valeria Luiselli, started writing a novel about the children seeking asylum in the US, and their treatment, including inhumane detention and deportation, by the immigration system, based on both her own experience as a volunteer translator working in the court system, and a road trip taken to the border area, and in particular Apachería, with her then husband, novelist Álvaro Enrigue and their children / respective step-children. Enrigue himself was researching the history of Native American in the late 19th century at the end of the American Indian wars, which he later used as a basis for his novel Ahora me rindo y eso es todo.

Luiselli's first attempt to novelise her experience was overly literal, polemical and didactic: “using it as a vehicle for my own rage, stuffing it with everything from children’s testimonies to the history of American interventionism in central America ... it just wasn’t working. There’s a different way of assuming a political sense in fiction, I think.”

So she instead documented her experiences and views in the non-fictional Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions, and then worked her experiences, including the gradual disintegration of her marriage which dated to the road-trip, into this beautiful novel: still political, but highly poetic as well.

Because Lost Children Archive not only shines a literary light on its core topic matter, but is a lovely meditation on family relationships and communication within families, and a novel firmly embedded in literature, particularly that of Latin America (Pedro Páramo is a key text) but worldwide. This, like the non-fictional novel, is written in English, after her previous novels were written in Spanish.

Given the timeliness of the topic matter, it is easy to see the novel as anti-Trump, and certainly Luiselli has said she is no fan. But it is sobering that the events documented all actually took place in the Obama error, and, while travelling through Arkansas, the narrator muses on Bill Clinton, and how he actually first started to 'build the wall'. As characteristic of the novel, Luiselli's narrator gives this fact a wonderfully literary spin:

Then there’s the slightly more comic than tragic death of the Czech writer Bohumil Hrabal, who did not die in Arkansas, but who was for some reason beloved by ex-president Bill Clinton, who lived in Little Rock when he served as Arkansas’s governor— so there is that connection.

I once saw a photograph of a beer-red, chubby-grinned Bill hanging on the wall of a bar in central Prague. He did not look out of place there, as dignitaries always do in restaurant pictures. He could have been the brother of the owner of the bar, or one of the regulars. Hard to think that the man in that picture, full of bonhomie, was the same man who laid the first brick in the wall dividing Mexico and the United States, and then pretended it never happened. In the photograph, he is shaking hands across the table with Hrabal,

whose Dancing Lessons for the Advanced in Age Clinton might have read and liked.

I had read the book during that trip to Prague. I read it in a state of quiet awe, and underlined and memorized strange and simple lines that I still remember:
"the minute I saw you I could tell you were supersensitive"
"he was a whoreson"
"a composer … once tore a chandelier out of the ceiling in his grief"
"a giant of a girl, but beautiful"
"the world was as deserted as a star"

More than his books, more than his harsh humor and Decameronian tableaux of human tragicomedy, more than anything, it is the story of Hrabal's own death that has haunted me, always. He died like this: recovering from bronchitis in a hospital room, while trying to feed the pigeons, he fell out of the window. But Hrabal does not live in Arkansas, so I don't tell the family about him either.

The novel has a husband and wife making a road-trip from New York, across the US, to Apachería with their children:

The girl is my daughter and the boy is my husband's son. I'm a biological mother to one, a stepmother to the other, and a de facto mother in general to both of them. My husband is a father and a stepfather, to each one respectively, but also just a father. The girl and boy are therefore: step-sister, son, stepdaughter, daughter, step-brother, sister, stepson, brother. And because hyphenations and petty nuances complicate the sentences of everyday grammar—the us, the them, the our, the your—as soon as we started living together, when the boy was almost six and the girl still a toddler, we adopted the much simpler possessive adjective our to refer to them two. They became: our children. And sometimes: the boy, the girl. Quickly, the two of them learned the rules of our private grammar, and adopted the generic nouns Mama and Papa, or sometimes simply Ma and Pa. And until now at least, our family lexicon defined the scope and limits of our shared world.

My husband and I met four years ago, recording a soundscape of New York City. We were part of a large team of people working for the Center for Oral History at Columbia University.

For here the (auto-)fictional husband and wife are not authors but sound archivists. But now with the New York project complete, they are working on their own different projects - the husband to document sounds relating to the lost Native American tribes (or rather sounds today from the spaces they occupied) and the wife those relating to the 'lost children' in the US immigration system. The separate projects cause them to drift apart - highlighting their professional differences (she more a journalist, him more an artist):

I suppose my husband and I simply hadn't prepared for the second part of our togetherness, the part where we just lived the life we'd been making . Without a future professional project together, we began to drift apart in other ways. I guess we— or perhaps just I— had made the very common mistake of thinking that marriage was a mode of absolute commonality and a breaking down of all boundaries, instead of understanding it simply as a pact between two people willing to be the guardians of each other's solitude, as Rilke or some other equanimous, philosophical soul had long ago prescribed. But can anyone really prepare? Can anyone tackle effects before detecting causes?
...
When we were in better spirits, we were able to joke about our differences. We'd say that I was a documentarist and he was a documentarian, which meant that I was more like a chemist and he was more like a librarian.

But they embark on one (last?) road trip together, with their two children, which forms the narrative thread of the novel.

Although the story is not told in a simple linear fashion and all the better for it. Luiselli's narrator uses a classroom lesson given to her young daughter to make a point about writing:

She asks me to make four squares for her— two at the top, two at the bottom —and instructs me to label them in this order: "Character," "Setting," "Problem," "Solution." When I finish labeling the four squares and ask what they're for, she explains that at school, they taught her to tell stories this way. Bad literary education begins too early and continues for way too long.

and in a line that could have come from BS Johnson's Albert Angelo (and given Luiselli's borrowing from across literature quite possibly did):

If we are forced to produce a story in retrospect, our narrative wraps itself selectively around the elements that seem relevant, bypassing all the others.

Because as with all of Luiselli's novel this one is very carefully constructed, drawing on multiple sources, and here she makes them explicit, having her characters carry archive boxes of source material. She looks through one of her husband's boxes:

It comes to me that maybe, by shuffling around in my husband's boxes like this, once in a while, when he's not looking, and by trying to listen to all the sounds trapped in his archive, I might find a way into the exact story I need to document, the exact form it needs. I suppose an archive gives you a kind of valley in which your thoughts can bounce back to you, transformed. You whisper intuitions and thoughts into the emptiness, hoping to hear something back. And sometimes, just sometimes, an echo does indeed return, a real reverberation of something, bouncing back with clarity when you've finally hit the right pitch and found the right surface. I search inside my husband's Box III, which at first glance seems like an all-male compendium of "going a journey," conquering and colonizing: Heart of Darkness, The Cantos, The Waste Land, Lord of the Flies, On the Road, 2666, the Bible. Among these I find a small white book— the galleys of a novel by Nathalie Léger called Untitled for Barbara Loden. It looks a little out of place there, squeezed and silent, so I take it out and head back to the room.

That all-male compendium forms part of the chorus of voices that makes a novel, indeed the opening lines from another such book The Road, form a literal chorus to the trip as the in-car audio player seems to default to this audiobook whenever switched on:

When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him.

but I was particularly pleased by the reference to the English translation, by Natasha Lehrer and Cécile Menon of Suite for Barbara Loden, a book that also triggered the formation of the wonderful publisher Les Fugitives (Blue Self-Portrait, Now, Now, Louison etc).

I turn on my bedside lamp and stay up late, reading the novel by Nathalie Léger, underlining parts of sentences:
"violence, yes, but the acceptable face of violence, the kind of banal cruelty enacted within the family"
"the hum of ordinary life"
"the story of a woman who has lost something important but does not know exactly what"

“a woman on the run or in hiding, concealing her pain and her refusal, putting on an act in order to break free”

The novel also contains a wonderful passage on the effect of such passages in literature on the reader:

I do remember, though, that when I read Sontag for the first time, just like the first time I read Hannah Arendt, Emily Dickinson, and Pascal, I kept having those sudden, subtle, and possibly microchemical raptures— little lights flickering deep inside the brain tissue— that some people experience when they finally find words for a very simple and yet till then utterly unspeakable feeling. When someone else’s words enter your consciousness like that, they become small conceptual light-marks.

They’re not necessarily illuminating. A match struck alight in a dark hallway, the lit tip of a cigarette smoked in bed at midnight, embers in a dying chimney: none of these things has enough light of its own to reveal anything. Neither do anyone’s words. But sometimes a little light can make you aware of the dark, unknown space that surrounds it, of the enormous ignorance that envelops everything we think we know. And that recognition and coming to terms with darkness is more valuable than all the factual knowledge we may ever accumulate.

And when she reveals to use her own archive box:

At the very top of the box, I placed a few books I’d read and thought could help me think about the whole project from a certain narrative distance: The Gates of Paradise, by Jerzy Andrzejewski; The Children's Crusade..., by Marcel Schwob; Belladonna, by Daša Drndi? ; Le goût de l'archive, by Arlette Farge; and a little red book I hadn’t yet read, called Elegies for Lost Children, by Ella Camposanto.

The foreword explains that Elegies for Lost Children was originally written in Italian by Ella Camposanto, and translated into English by Aretha Cleare. It is the only work by Camposanto (1928– 2014), who probably wrote it over a span of several decades, and is loosely based on the historical Children’s Crusade, which involved tens of thousands of children who traveled alone across, and possibly beyond, Europe, and which took place in the year 1212 (though historians disagree about most of this crusade’s fundamental details).

But this last book is actually a fictional construction of Luiselli's own which forms a lovely novel within a novel in the book, the author's name meaning cemetery in Italian, and perhaps also a nod to W G Sebald's Campo Santo. And as she explains in an extensive and illuminating afterword, the Elegies allude to various literary sources, including those from her husband's box:

The Elegies are composed by means of a series of allusions to literary works that are about voyages, journeying, migrating, etc. The allusions need not be evident. I’m not interested in intertextuality as an outward, performative gesture but as a method or procedure of composition.

The first elegies allude to Ezra Pound’s “Canto I,”which is itself an “allusion”to Homer’s Book XI of the Odyssey—his “Canto I”is a free translation from Latin, and not Greek, into English, following Anglo-Saxon accentual verse metrics, of Book XI of the Odyssey. Book XI of Homer’s Odyssey, as well as Pound’s “Canto I,”is about journeying/ descending into the underworld. So, in the opening Elegies about the lost children, I reappropriate certain rhythmic cadences as well as imagery and lexicon from Homer/ Pound, in order to establish an analogy between migrating and descending into the underworld. I repurpose and recombine words or word-pairings like “swart/ night,”“heavy/ weeping,”and “stretched/ wretched”—all of which derive from lines in “Canto I.”

There are many such references, my favourite of all - as I've done exactly the same thing- when a child in the novel within a novel asks for a story, and receives perhaps the most famous piece of flash fiction in world literature: “El dinosaurio” by Augusto Monterroso;

And two of my favourites literary references from the main novel:

The narrator relays a fictional version of a real incident in Luiselli and Enrigue's trip. As they, Latin American in origin and hence appearance, get closer to the border they are increasingly themselves suspect, frequently asked for their passports by law authorities and called to account as to why they are in the area. On one occasion Enrigue / the narrator's husband claims they are they to research a spaghetti western, which draws a favourable response but further (albeit friendly) interrogation as to their inspiration:

My husband rummages in the back of his mind for names of directors of and actors in spaghetti Westerns. He is visibly struggling to win at least one point in credibility with our host. But he’s not managing too well, so I interrupt him: My favorite Western is Bela Tarr’s Satantango!

And when their children, towards the novel's end, goes missing, she muses on how far one should allow children to stray:

A friend of mine calls this “the rescue distance”— the constant equation operating in a parent’s mind, where time and distance are factored in to calculate whether it would be possible to save a child from danger.

The 'friend' of course Samanta Schweblin and a reference to her wonderful Distancia de rescate (oddly published in English under the title Fever Dream).

One wonderful thing with the novel is how the children are brought into the conversations:

We both decided, even though we never really spoke about it, that we should treat our own children not as lesser recipients to whom we, adults, had to impart our higher knowledge of the world, always in small, sugarcoated doses, but as our intellectual equals. Even if we also needed to be the guardians of our children’s imaginations and protect their right to travel slowly from innocence toward more and more difficult acknowledgments, they were our life partners in conversation, fellow travelers in the storm with whom we strove constantly to find still waters.
...
Children’s words, in some ways, are the escape route out of family dramas, taking us to their strangely luminous underworld, safe from our middle-class catastrophes. From that day on, I think, we started allowing our children’s voices to take over our silence. We allowed their imaginations to alchemize all our worry and sadness about the future into some sort of redeeming delirium: tooshiefreedom! Conversations, in a family, become linguistic archaeology. They build the world we share, layer it in a palimpsest, give meaning to our present and future. The question is, when, in the future, we dig into our intimate archive, replay our family tape, will it amount to a story? A soundscape? Or will it all be sound rubble, noise, and debris?

Although it doesn't always work as planned:

The boy and I fiddle with his new camera outside. What am I supposed to do? he asks.

I tell him— trying to translate between a language I know well and a language I know little about— that he just needs to think of photographing as if he were recording the sound of an echo. But in truth, it’s difficult to draw parallels between sonography and photography. A camera can capture an entire portion of a

landscape in a single impression; but a microphone, even a parabolic one, can sample only fragments and details.

What I mean, Ma, is what button do I press

One issue that seems inevitably raised nowadays is cultural appropriation, something of which Luiselli's narrator is very conscious:

Constant concerns: Cultural appropriation, pissing all over someone else's toilet seat, who am I to tell this story, micromanaging identity politics, heavy-handedness, am I too angry, am I mentally colonized by Western-Saxon-white categories, what's the correct use of personal pronouns, go light on the adjectives, and oh, who gives a fuck how very whimsical phrasal verbs are?

This is particularly relevant with the sections on Native Americans, rooted in historical tales rather than present reality. I was initially a little concerned with this, particularly given the salutary comments made in Tommy Orange's important There There.

But the best answer to those concerns is a suitable way to conclude my review.

"Impossibly smart, full of beauty, heart and insight, Lost Children Archive is a novel about archiving all that we don't want to lose. It is an ode to sound. Valeria Luiselli looks into the American present as well as its history: into Native American history, and the many intersections between American and Mexican history that are and have always been there. This is a road trip novel that transcends the form, while also being the perfect American road trip novel for right now. Everyone should read this book" –Tommy Orange

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Kasa Cotugno says

One of my favorite books of this or any other year. This epic is told against the backdrop of the current humanitarian nightmare of parent/child separations at the border, of the inexplicable and indefensible reality of children sometimes only a few months old being incarcerated in cells miles away from families.

A New York couple sets out on the road trip to end all road trips, leaving their NYC home in a vintage Volvo with seven bankers' boxes and the recording equipment which provides their livelihood. In the back seat are their 10-year-old son and 5-year-old daughter, each from a previous union, and individual characteristics are revealed piecemeal as the journey continues. What is apparent from the beginning is that this is a highly functioning, intellectual family with a great deal of curiosity and desire to experience the country as it unrolls. The early chapters, as told by Ma, provide a narrative of pressure cooker familial love experienced on the blue highway journey. At no time do they seem in a hurry, never seem to use throughways, decamping in Motel Six type accommodations and eating in diners where ketchup bottles haven't been washed in weeks. When not listening to audible books or evocative music such as Appalachian Spring, they hear of the border crisis on the news, a subject that Ma has developed a personal interest in. There is so much to digest in this book -- the almost metaconstruct of Ma's decoction of the Lord of the Flies, which seems an odd choice for audible reading for children of these ages. Ma's explanation to her son is that William Golding was writing about the behavior of adults during and after WWII, but using children to populate his metaphor. At times I felt as if I were in the back seat, attending a seminar in advanced literature.

The final third of the book takes the reader into completely uncharted territory. Told by the boy in the form

of a monologue to his young sister, there are sections that could be regarded as stylistically self serving, but given the previous pieces, work. Including a runon sentence that goes for pages and pages, almost like movies shot in one continuous take such as I Am Cuba and The Russian Ark. This is one of those books with so much relevance and material that it should find a place on awards lists.

Kate Olson says

DNF at 20% - but it could definitely just be a case of me not being the right reader for this book at this time. I wanted ALL of the migrant storyline and none of the sound theory (or whatever that part of the book is about - I straight up just didn't get it). I thought the narrative structure was interesting and there being no character names was also interesting. I LOVED her essay published by Coffee House Press last year. I mistakenly believed this would be a fictionalization of that, and it's my fault that I went into it with the wrong expectations. I can't wait to see what my trusted reviewer friends have to say about this one - right now I believe my DNF was about me, not the book?

Here's a great article about her from the NYT - Valeria Luiselli, At Home in Two Worlds https://nyti.ms/2DZJ3RB?smid=nytcore-...

Free review copy from Knopf and Edelweiss

Hugh says

Longlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction 2019
This is my new favourite book of the year so far - an original, daring and timely story inspired by the experiences of desperate children crossing the desert border between Mexico and New Mexico and Arizona, and the Apache warriors who made their last stand in the desert.

The framing story describes a road trip the narrator, her husband, his 10 year old son and her 5 year old daughter make from New York to the New Mexico desert. Early on she states that it was the last trip they made as a family. The couple were brought together by a documentary project on the voices and languages of New York, but their future projects diverge as the husband becomes obsessed with the Apache and the narrator who is drawn to the story of a Mexican friend whose children have been detained at the border while crossing into America illegally.

They take 7 boxes with them - 4 for the man, one for the woman and one for each of the children. Inventories of the contents of these boxes are used to divide the sections, and these list the books Luiselli was inspired by, and as she explains in her afterword quotes from these pepper the main narratives. The final box contains the Polaroid photos of the journey taken from the boy's camera.

The children are intelligent and perceptive, taking inspiration for their games from the parents' interests and from the music they listen to.

(view spoiler)

I have only scratched the surface of this fascinating book here, but I see this book as a potential prize winner.

Neil says

This is one of those books where the reader (at least, THIS reader), because of the subject matter, feels a certain pressure to like the book and post positive comments about it. We are reading about the US's attitude to its indigenous people and to those, especially children, who try to cross the border from Mexico, often with the aim of meeting up with parents who work there with no documentation.

But it is a strange story and one that, for my personal taste, tries a bit too hard. But more on that later.

An unnamed woman narrates the first half of the book. She is mother to a daughter and she is now married to a man who has a son from a previous relationship. None of these additional three characters is ever named. Mother and father met working on a project to document languages in New York. Much is made of one being a documentarian and the other a documentarist. In the dictionary, these are synonymous, but here there is a distinction:

"We'd say that I was a documentarist and he was a documentarian, which meant that I was like a chemist and he was more like a librarian".

(Note that this distinction is the opposite way round to that described in the book blurb on Goodreads which refers to HIM as a documentarist, so the reader is not the only one confused by it).

So that's all clear, then. As the son says later in the book, *"But both of them did basically the same thing…".*

The parents decide to make a road trip from New York to Arizona, using the long journey to continue the recording projects on which they are working. He is driven by his desire to learn about the Apaches (*But why Apaches, Pa? Because. Because what? Because they were the last of something.*). She is searching for the two lost daughters of a friend who were last heard of when they set out to cross into the US from Mexico riding on top of a train. As part of their luggage, they take seven boxes, four for him and one each for her and the two children. We learn the contents of these boxes as the book progresses.

At about the halfway point, the narrator switches to become the boy. This confused me for many pages. Not because I didn't realise the narrator had changed but because a 10-year-old narrator seems to be far more mature and sophisticated than his stepmother. I think there may be a clue in the fact that the narrative switches from present tense to past tense which I assume could mean that we are reading the view of an adult looking back to a time in his childhood, but I don't know. Given that the six year old girl tells the most sophisticated knock-knock jokes I have ever heard, it was all rather disorientating. Also, the narrator switches a few more times as the story progresses which suggests there's some kind of continuity in timeline.

The other thing that confused me as I read, and which made me think I was perhaps reading something more akin to magical realism of some kind, is that the family read a book together about lost children and then, at one point in the story, those lost children appear in the actual narrative.

But that is all I will say about the plot. It would be unfair to talk about what happens to the family as they head west - you need to read it for yourself. Just don't expect it all to make completely logical sense - I don't think that is the point.

It is all very clever (the book the family reads plays a sort of meta-narrative role in the book which I won't explain here as I don't want to spoil things) but, for me, it is perhaps a bit too clever. Some of the prose feels over-written (anyone for *"rhetorical usufruct"* or *"…his prosody well attuned to the necrological hypocrisy of the plaque"*) and sometimes the construction of the book seems to take precedence over the story and it feels a bit artificial. I know many others will disagree with me, but I found all this a bit distracting from what, at its heart, is a story about important issues. Reading the afterword where the author explains some of the subtleties of what she has done in the book just increases this feeling.

My rating reflects, I hope, a balance between an important subject that was, for me, hidden by the cleverness of the book's structure and writing.

My thanks to HarperCollins UK for an advance copy via NetGalley.

Eric Anderson says

"Lost Children Archive" must have one of the most unusual structures for a novel that I've read in a long time. It seems natural that Valeria Luiselli's first novel written in English would chiefly concern the plight of immigrant children as her extended essay "Tell Me How It Ends" so powerfully laid out this harrowing dilemma. Since politicians often turn immigration into an abstract political debate, Luiselli has a tremendous ability for highlighting and reminding us how this is above all a human rights issue and makes us see the humans effect. The ramifications for children who are adrift and literally wandering blindly through this landscape with stringently guarded borders are incalculable because when they become lost in a political system "They are children who have lost the right to a childhood." In this novel she expands this understanding and creates an artful story which traverses time and space to illuminate a new way of looking at what happens when our society loses its children.

At its centre, this is a road trip novel about a husband and wife driving with their son and daughter across America. They're engaged in a project to capture and record the sounds of the country to better understand its nature of being. The couple's relationship is also disintegrating and the closer they come to their destination the closer this family comes to separating. What begins as a deeply-felt intellectual reflection about the ways we negotiate children's place in our lives turns into a tense search for those who have gone missing with hallucinatory twists. It sounds confusing and I'm still puzzling over the experience of it, but this innovative novel shines with so much humanity I found it utterly compelling and engaging.

Read my full review of Lost Children Archive by Valeria Luiselli on LonesomeReader

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Collin says

LONGLISTED FOR THE 2019 WOMEN'S PRIZE FOR FICTION

This novel is not one but two narratives. The first narrative is the story of a family travelling to the Apacheria, where the father hopes to record and document sounds from the location that Geronimo and the Apaches lived. The mother also works in acoustics and the two of them met working together documenting sounds and recording a soundscape of New York City. However, their relationship is dying, and this trip

could be the final nail in the coffin. Both father and mother have a child from another partner, but this part of the narrative is left intentionally vague and is not part of the story. Strangely we are never given the names of the family members either. Perhaps the family is meant to represent a typical average family, and Luiselli wants the reader to focus on the narrative not the characters, not sure. This narrative is firstly narrated by the mother and later the ten-year old son, and sees the mother and father slowly slipping further apart, and as the trip progresses, the gulf between the two begins to widen. While the father is absorbed in his project with the Apaches, the mother becomes more and more concerned about an immigrant friend's missing children. She takes a strong interest in the plights of the immigrants who go missing, particularly the children, while trying to cross the border. This increasing interest leads into the second narrative which takes the form of a book that the mother reads to the children to help stave off boredom on the road. The book is called The Lost Children and is about seven young migrant children trying to cross the border into the States. When the son and daughter strike out on their own to try to find the mother's friend's missing children the narratives seem to converge together, and the son and daughter literally become the lost children. Documenting and recording is a major theme of the novel. Even the son, who is afraid he will lose contact with his sister if the parents separate, is documenting the trip to maintain a record for her. The boot of the car is filled with archive boxes and each family member has at least one of their own. I believe that Luiselli is using all of this documentation as a contrast to show us that the lost children are more than just data recorded in an archive, more than just a statistic recorded and then filed away. Each lost child is a tragedy, a life stolen away before it even got a chance. I have not read any of Luiselli's other work but this subject seems to be one she is very passionate about, and you could feel it in her writing. One problem for me was at times Luiselli dances along the fine line of beautiful, exquisite prose, and overwriting. She may cross it a few times, but this is very much a personal criticism and down to the reader's taste. Having said that, I think that there is some terrific writing, and the way Luiselli brings the narratives together is skilfully handled. The way she weaves the children from the first narrative briefly into the second is genius. I also like the way that the perspective is changed from the mother to the son in the main narrative, it works extremely well. With a little editing and cuts this could have been a five star read for me, I still enjoyed it immensely though. 4 Stars.

Meike says

Nominated for the Women's Prize for Fiction 2019
Unfortunately, this novel illustrates the difference between well-intentioned and well executed: Luiselli writes about the plight of migrants trying to cross the border between Mexico and the US, especially children making this dangerous passage through the desert in hopes of being re-united with family members who work in the States. So this author has a message, and an important one, and there is nothing wrong with selling a message to readers per se, but Luiselli is trying way too hard, thus over-constructing her text by throwing in all kinds of ideas as well as narrative strands and sometimes forcing connections that simply make no sense.

The main storyline is about a patchwork family in the process of falling apart: Each parent brought one child into the marriage - a boy and a girl - and the grown-ups used to work together on a soundscape project, trying to record the languages spoken in NYC. Now the husband (they remain unnamed) wants to do a project about the removal of the Apaches, so the family makes a road trip to former Apacheria. The wife wants to do a project about the children who get lost in the desert and is also trying to help a woman to find her two kids who disappeared while trying to cross the border. Oh yes, and the boy and the girl are afraid they will lose each other when their parents separate.

This is symbolism overload, and the composition is based on comparing apples to oranges. In their

respective projects, the husband and the wife aim to record the "echoes" of the lost children and of the Apaches. I do not know how many books Tommy Orange, Joshua Whitehead, Terese Marie Mailhot et al. have to write until people stop pushing the destructive narrative of the "vanishing Indian" - Native Americans are still a vital part of North America, but they only appear as a vanished people in this story, firmly stuck in the past, a narrative device without a voice, defined by an alleged absence. The fact that one of the children has a Mexican Indian great-grandmother (this info is buried deep in the text) just feels like another idea that adds to the over-construction of the story.

The children who cross the border also don't get to speak in this text, they are represented through stories: In the news, in books, in the imagination. Once they are looked at, but to what end? The point here is to document and record their absence - that's the idea the author had, and it remains an idea in the text as well ((view spoiler)). And does it make sense to compare the Native American genocide to migrant children trying to cross the border to siblings being torn apart by divorce, because people get "lost"? I think it's a mess.

What makes it even harder to read is that the characters are difficult to accept: The children sometimes don't sound ike children, and it remains abstract why the parents want to separate. Often, they read like caricatures of leftist intellectuals (this novel has literary cross-references abound), which makes the reader feel sorry for the children. Oh yeah, and the book is too long.

I wish I could have loved this, because migration is such an important topic, and the racism of the current US administration needs to be fought, but this book does not have the heart and the power it would have needed to succeed.

Janelle • She Reads with Cats says

Review to come
