

The Spider and Her Demons



AUTHORS

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RECOMMENDED FOR: Mid to Upper Secondary
(Language, Violence, Drug References, Suicide Ideation)

SYNOPSIS

Between surviving high school and working at her aunt's dumpling shop, all Zhi wants is to find time for her friends . . . and make sure no-one finds out she's half spider-demon.

But when she accidentally kills and eats a man in front of the most popular girl in school, she discovers she might not be the scariest thing in the shadows.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

sydney khoo (they/them) is a nonbinary and aromantic asexual writer, born on Dharawal Country (South Western Sydney), to Malaysian Chinese parents. They have a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and a Masters in Creative Writing. Having worked at an eclectic mix of places, including a suicide prevention centre, tattoo parlour, publishing house and medical clinic, sydney has found working in made-up worlds to be most fulfilling. Though typically drinking bubble tea in Cabramatta, or reading fanfiction in a McDonald's carpark, they can occasionally be found writing poetry and stories at cafés with their dog Gizmo.

sydney khoo is a recipient of Penguin Random House Australia's Write It fellowship program, which aspires to find, nurture and develop unpublished writers across all genres, with a focus on underrepresented sections of our community.

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NOTE

Content Warning: This story features some distressing content, including, but not limited to: assault, violence, murder, blood/gore, body horror and death. There are descriptions of body dysphoria, and references to childhood trauma, psychosis and suicidal ideation. Readers with these triggers are advised to read with caution.

THEMES

- Intergenerational trauma
- Families and alternative families
- Migration and migrant families
- LGBTQI+ characters and relationships

- Nature vs nurture
- Prejudice
- Paranormal and supernatural
- Urban/dark fantasy and magic realism

STUDY NOTES

BEFORE READING

- Have a look at the cover and the blurb. See if you can identify elements of various genres. For example, consider various sub-genres of horror, fantasy, romance, graphic novels/comics or coming-of-age novels.
- What symbols are in the illustration that might be relevant? Are any of the genres above or the symbolic elements obvious in the blurb?
- After reading the blurb, pinpoint what you think the story will be about and the concepts that it might explore. What seems interesting to you about the story before reading it?

AFTER READING

Trauma

- When we first meet Zhi, she is intent on hiding her 'form'. There are obvious reasons for this, related to staying safe in a world that doesn't know about or accept demons. But there are other reasons for keeping hidden. Identify the reasons—practical and emotional—for Zhi hiding her form. What do you see as practical reasons? What reasons do you find unnecessary, unacceptable or unfair?
- Aunt Mei insists that Zhi keep her 'form' hidden at all times, 'Be small. Be quiet. Be invisible.' Throughout the novel the reader (and Zhi) come to understand that Aunt Mei has had her life changed by taking on responsibility for Zhi. In what ways has Aunt Mei experienced grief, loss and trauma? What tragedy might Zhi's demon-self remind her of? Considering this, why do you think she might be so hostile towards Zhi's demon identity?
- Trauma can affect how people interact with those closest to them. How is that true in this story? Consider how Aunt Mei communicates with Zhi, the levels of conflict in the house, and the levels of family togetherness, parental warmth and involvement.
 - Compare and contrast how Zhi thinks of Angela and Nadira's parents and Ms Sharma's care versus what she thinks of Aunt Mei's parenting.
- Zhi comes to understand that Aunt Mei is doing the best she can. But in what ways has Aunt Mei's trauma been passed on to Zhi?
 - Look up and explore the concept of 'intergenerational trauma'. Write down the definition and consider possible impacts on Zhi. Think of things like her ability to accept and give affection and to what extent she is able to explore and discuss her identity and use strategies like positive self-talk.
- Zhi carries a heavy burden of anxiety and self-hate. What negative emotions are linked in Zhi's mind with her demon form and what key moments in her life formed those connections?
- At the beginning of the novel, does Zhi have any positive feelings about her demon identity? By the end of the novel has that improved? If so, what are the key moments of healing? Choose a creative way of summarising each of these.
- 'Fear is nothing more than a physiological response. Everything else is in your head . . .'

'Bravery isn't a lack of fear; it's moving forward in spite of it.'

Consider these two ways the book presents moving forward in spite of fear and trauma. Neither of them assume that the source or evidence of trauma will disappear. Which do you most identify with?

- Use one of the statements above as a creative prompt for an art, musical or written piece.

Families and Alternative Families

- One of the central themes of the novel is the relationship between parents and children. The novel also explores friendships and partners as the families we choose for ourselves. Zhi uses her experience of how she eats as a spider-demon to decide whether she thinks her mother killed her father. What do you think might have happened? What do you think her parent's relationship was like? Remember there is no correct or incorrect answer.
 - Start with character sketches and a personality description of Zhi's mum and dad as you imagine them. Consider

their past and how they might have met. Then think about who might have killed Zhi's dad and how. Once you feel you know these characters, plan out a short story including the death. There are no limits on genre—it might be horror or paranormal/dark romance or it might be crime/police procedural or even dark-comedy. The killer might be the villain or the hero/anti-hero of the story. The death might be self-defence, an attack or unavoidable accident. Be original, but stay true to your characters and their motivations.

- Sometimes the most important subjects in families are never discussed. Aunt Mei can't or won't discuss the past or Zhi's spider-demon identity. Write a monologue from Aunt Mei's point of view based on a key scene in the novel. Share how she feels and the memories that the events might trigger for her.
 - How might the scene have gone differently if she had been able to react differently to Zhi or the situation?
- Do you believe that our personalities are formed mostly by nature (our genetics) or nurture (the environment and the people who influence us)?
 - Dior is 'unwanted' by her mother and is literally a curse (made up of demons who her mother has killed), but she has been raised in relative stability and privilege by an empathetic adoptive father who loves her unconditionally. What kind of person might Dior have been if she had been raised solely by Quinlee? On the other hand, how might Dior have coped with her very intense father if her genetics (nature) had been different?
 - Write a blurb for a novel based around each of these different Diors. What kind of story might each be if you changed the nature or the nurture?
- 'Why her? Out of every single person in the world, you pick Dior Panne-Nix . . .' Nadira is jealous, but she is also very unhappy with who Zhi is spending time with. If friends don't approve of someone's chosen partner or new friend, do you think they should say something or not? Write a persuasive speech arguing your point.
- 'All you do is hold us at arm's length, Zhi. Quite literally, in fact! We're not even allowed to touch you. You act like we're infected or dirty or something. You think we don't notice but we do . . .' Physical touch is often seen as being at the heart of all close relationships—parenting relationships, close friendships and especially romantic relationships. For various reasons, Zhi is not comfortable with physical touch. Think about Nadira's statement above and what you know about Zhi from reading the novel. If you disagree with Nadira's point, write a personal letter/email/message to her explaining why.
- Adoptive families take many forms. Write a letter from Julien to Zhi, explain how his feelings for Dior changed from being his 'charge' to being his 'daughter'.
- If Dior is undeserving of compassion, of love, does that mean Zhi is too?
- Dior does not have the same set of ethics and social expectations as the wider Australian society (or Zhi). After a while, Zhi comes to realise how dangerous Dior is—as herself and as Repens. What do you see as the reasons Zhi is attracted/drawn to Dior despite this knowledge? Why and how does Zhi justify Dior's behaviour and justify her feelings towards Dior?

Cultural identity

- Other than hiding her 'form', in what other ways does Aunt Mei try to force Zhi to be a 'good girl'? Consider concepts such as 'culture clash' and different value systems.
- What challenges does Zhi face in trying to balance what will keep her friends happy and what will make her aunt happy? How are both of these sometimes at odds with her own needs?
- Zhi was raised in Australia by her Malaysian Chinese aunt and finds herself torn between the culture of the country she lives in and her family culture. This gets in the way of her connecting completely with either culture. Language is one way she doesn't feel 'enough'. Can you think of other ways?

Selfhood and identity

- Zhi has not had the opportunity to explore her identity and has spent her life pretending to be someone she is not. What real-life situations might this work as an analogy for? Who might have to hide their identity and why?
- Can you think of examples from modern Australia where someone's sense of self or their identity might have been 'demonised' in the media or their right to exist questioned? Consider examples of people enduring negative or hateful commentary under the guise of 'reporting' or 'balance'. Look, for example, at mainstream media around marriage equality, trans visibility, crime reporting or the Voice referendum. Choose one example that fits the description above (a written piece or transcript) and discuss how it might be problematic.

- What evidence is there in the novel that hiding her identity and feeling shame about herself has put enormous stress on Zhi? What do you see as the negative impact on her mental health?
- There are several binary identities across the novel (monster or human, tarchanjan witches or Witches of Wight, demons or witches). Consider how they might be restrictive for the characters who have to choose between them. In contrast, are there examples of feeling validated—where terminology helps a character to come to terms with their identity?
- Choose one of the following and discuss:
 - How does Quinlee as The Grey Witch defy the two binary witch categories?
 - How does Dior’s identity extend beyond the binary choice of witch or demon? In contrast how does discovering the term ‘spider-demon’ (or Spider Demon) make Zhi feel?

Ethics and personal decisions

- Consider the key conversations Zhi and Dior have about ethical behaviour. How do the two differ in their views? How do those views fit with the legal and ethical framework of Australian society?
- Do you have a set of personal ethics that you live by? Write a personal piece setting out the basic ethics that you stand by.
- Dior makes efforts to stay within social norms to please and look after her father. What motivates people to live by the rules of a society? As a part of your answer, look up and consider the difference between ‘laws’, ‘rules’ and ‘customs’.
- ‘If you hurt someone, does the absence of intent absolve you?’ Write an essay considering the case for and against and come to a conclusion based on the events in this novel.
- Consider what has happened to Repens and the other demons in the past, and Repens’ possible motivations for violence. Consider the historic conflict between demons and witches referred to in the novel.
 - Write an opinion piece for a mainstream newspaper arguing whether Repens’ behaviour can be justified by past wrongs.
- Do you think Zhi is justified in attacking the man? Consider questions of self-defence and alternative actions she could have taken.
 - In a closing speech as a barrister for the defence or the prosecution, make a case for or against Zhi’s actions being justified.
- ‘She feels the eyes on her forehead roll back, lids fluttering closed . . . There’s no danger here . . . Her stomach fills with warm euphoria. She can’t figure out, can’t remember, why she’s gone all her life without this . . . It’s only when there’s nothing left to swallow, no meat left in the sack, that it comes trickling back—all the reasons why killing someone and eating them is Not Good.’ Consider the language used to describe this scene. What is the general tone? Is that at odds with how Zhi later feels about having killed someone? Does the fact that she enjoyed it change or affect your view of whether her actions were justified?
- Make a case for and against each of the following actions:
 - Does the trucker’s creepy behaviour justify Dior manipulating him and stealing his wallet?
 - Does Dior’s assumption that Tobi wouldn’t be killed (only injured) justify her causing an accident so that Zhi would come over?
 - Is Dior justified in stealing the coach’s car because Dior was bored and the coach was being ‘insufferable’?
 - Did you feel all were equally justified? Why? Why not?

TROPES

Different fiction genres often come with their own ‘tropes’—recurring themes, motifs or plots that are common across many books in that genre. A great genre novel is one that employs these in an original or particularly satisfying way or subverts the trope while still being enjoyable.

- Look up the ‘found family/family of choice’ trope and write down your understanding of how it works in fiction. Note down books, movies or games across any genre that you think employ this trope successfully.
 - Detail the many different ways that this theme plays out in this novel, and what about each use is original, satisfying or subversive.

- *The Spider and Her Demons* is a blend of genres, including horror, urban fantasy, paranormal or dark romance and coming-of age. Look up these genres and write down the key themes, motifs or plots of each. Can you name an aspect of the book that fits into each genre? What is original about the author's use of those genre elements?
- Why do you think genres become popular, and why do you think readers often choose to read multiple books featuring the same trope?
- Look up and write down the features of the classic 'bad boy' trope. Are there ways in which Dior fits this trope? What are the ways in which the author subverts it? Discuss with appropriate supporting quotes.
- Look up and write down the features of the classic 'Enemies to Lovers' trope. In what way does the progression of the relationship/friendship between Zhi and Dior follow this structure? Draw a flow chart marking out the key scenes across the novel, including quotes as evidence.
 - Discuss in what way it meets the genre expectations? In what way does it subvert them?

SYMBOLISM

- The power of music to heal, calm, charm and bring people together is a common thread throughout the book. List each time music is mentioned in the novel and what it represents or does in each use.
- Throughout history, around the world, spiders have appeared in traditional stories. Research one example of the spider in traditional folklore, myth or religion. What did the spider represent? What characteristics of spiders do you think explains the symbolism?
 - How has the author used the spider as a symbol in this novel? Consider both Zhi's demon and the Daddy Long Legs.
- Spiders or spider creatures have been represented as both heroes and villains in popular culture. Consider Marvel, DC, manga and anime, Pokemon and book and film franchises like *Lord of the Rings* and Percy Jackson. Brainstorm at least five well-known 'spider' characters and write a summary of each.
 - Why do you think spiders make such compelling and interesting characters? Are there references or similarities in this novel to any of the characters or stories you listed?
- 'Fear and overcoming fear' is a major theme of the novel. Discuss (in essay form) how water as a symbol supports the story and explores this theme. Consider with supporting quotes, aspects such as:
 - whether Zhi learned to swim
 - the daddy-long-legs fear of water (and its return to spin its web near the shower)
 - Zhi's dreams of staring into the sea and longing to dive into it
 - Zhi's nightmares of trying to drown herself
 - Aunt Mei in their flat (flooded with her own tears)
 - Weeper's ability to control Zhi by controlling the water in human blood
 - the battle scene in the pool towards the end.
- Four is considered unlucky in many Chinese cultures. List and consider how the number four is used (and deliberately not used) across the novel. Discuss with examples from the text.