

The First Two Pages: “Our Own World” by Lina Chern

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An Essay by Lina Chern

When he was three years old, my son was diagnosed with autism. I got a lot of advice back then, all of it well-intentioned, little of it useful. When you’ve met one kid with autism, they say, you’ve met one kid with autism, and because my son was (and still is) nonverbal, taking care of him was a constant guessing game. What does this kid like to do? Why does he sometimes feel bad for no apparent reason? How do I meet his highly specific and often mysterious needs? There was no expert to turn to with these questions. The expert, it turned out, was me.

Ridiculous. I was barely an expert on taking care of myself. As someone whose own mind has never worked the way people around me seem to expect, this assignment felt ironic on the best days, damn-near impossible on the worst.

One thing my son made clear he liked to do was to go for long drives with music on. Honestly, same. The Monkees 50th Anniversary album *Good Times* had just come out, and it was a straight banger. We listened to it on repeat, winding our way through a crowded but lonely landscape of strip malls, car dealerships, chain restaurants, do-it-yourself car washes, and big-box stores. To this day, “Our Own World” is stamped on my memory as the bittersweet theme song of these

adventures, full of the kooky joy of shared oddball-hood but spiked with the uncertainty that comes with caring for a tiny weirdo when you're weird yourself.

Obviously, any story I wrote based on this song would start with a weirdo:

They started calling me Clover the third time I got sent up to Danville for robbery. It was supposed to be a joke about my luck, ha fucking ha. I preferred to think of myself as cursed, which implies somebody at least gave enough of a shit about my sorry liquor-store-robbing ass to concern themselves with my destiny, even if it was for purposes of evil. By my third release into the welcoming arms of Illinois' post-rehabilitation process, I realized being labeled unlucky was just a nicer way to say I was cataclysmically stupid.

I write in first-person a lot because it's a quick way to introduce a voice, and by extension, a character. Readers, those smart devils, are immediately distrustful of a first-person voice; surely, anyone who speaks this directly must be hiding something, maybe even from themselves. A story should begin with questions so intriguing the reader has no choice but to read on, and I enjoy encoding questions in the puzzle of a first-person voice as much as I enjoy decoding their answers as a reader.

Clover is a criminal, he says, and a really bad one. Why? Is he stupid, like he thinks? He doesn't seem stupid, if he's directed this much self-aware philosophizing at his own situation. Maybe he's not the best judge of who he is. So, who is he?

These were the warm and fuzzy thoughts blanketing my brain three-quarters into a joint, another queued up behind it, the next

episode of *F'ed Up Love* about to start, when the goddamn doorbell rang.

On the tiny block of cracked concrete the property manager called a front porch stood my sister, manhandling the strap of her Birkin tote and chewing her lower lip raw. Behind her, my niece emptied a watermelon-flavored Ramune into her gob.

“Jesus, Nat,” I said. “Again? What is it today? Rabies? Kuru? Very early Alzheimer’s?”

“Cotard’s Syndrome.” Opal slipped the empty bottle into her mom’s purse. “I believe I’m dead. Dead people don’t have to run the mile in gym class.”

“She told me she was going out to the bus and hid in the topiary garden and now here she is and I’m late for a shareholders meeting and I do. Not. Have. Time for this.” My sister never had time for anything difficult or inconvenient or that she otherwise didn’t feel like doing. “You try explaining to the school nurse and the dean and the social worker and who knows who else, that my kid is a sociopath with a WebMD addiction.”

First-person voice doesn’t leave a lot of room for exposition (people rarely sit around explaining themselves to themselves), so I sketched out Clover’s life in stokes of action, dialogue, and setting. In the arrival of his high-strung, upwardly-mobile sister Nat, we see that Clover lives outside more social lines than just those of the law. His living situation is iffy, he’s an anomaly in his family, and he’s distressingly idle when most people are busy.

“I’m standing right here,” Opal said.

“You can’t hear me, you’re dead,” Nat said. She was already turning to leave.

This is also our introduction to Clover’s young niece Opal: a liar, a trickster, a pain in the ass, and a repeat defector from the drudgery of school. In other words, another weirdo, just of a different stripe.

“Whoa, hold on.” I pulled at the drawstring on my sweat-pants. “I can’t watch her today. I have a thing.”

Nat’s glare set my face on fire. Even when we were kids, she always knew when I was lying. I wasn’t lying this time, though, I really did have plans, and I was not going down without a fight. Opal was a good kid, but she was moody, over-dramatic, too smart for her own good and also for mine. Every time Nat dumped her off on me, I ended up with shit missing from my dresser and lingering, unanswerable questions about my life choices.

“She’s twelve,” I said, “You’re telling me she can’t stay home by herself?”

“Not after the last time.” Nat tossed Opal an aggrieved glance. “I am not sending another apology letter to a senator.”

“State representative,” Opal said. “And he had it coming.”

“Anyway, what thing could you possibly have?” Nat said.

“A parole thing.” Not technically a lie. My parole officer would definitely be involved later. I hoped a reminder of my complicated relationship with Johnny Law would spur my sister to explore better babysitting options.

Having to take care of Opal is throwing a serious monkey wrench into Clover’s plans for the day which, considering how vaguely he describes them to his sister, are most certainly illegal.

But there’s more here, and this “more” turned out to be the heart of the story: Clover’s queasiness with his responsibility for Opal, when he is barely responsible for himself. She’s a strange kid, sure, but smart and special, and deserving of a better example than he feels he can provide.

Alas, Opal is here to stay:

No luck, big surprise. There was some shuffling and some instructions I forgot immediately and then Nat’s mirror-black Infiniti was receding down the block in a cloud of exhaust. Opal and I blinked at each other.

Too bad for Clover. Or is it? In stories, as in life, you get handed situations you have no choice but to handle with as much humor and empathy as you can. Did I intend to pour my parenting anxiety into a story based on a bouncy pop-music confection? I did not, but I recognized it once it was there. Anxiety and humor are wired on the same circuit, after all. That's writing: real life gets mixed into the sauce, even if the final dish tastes like something else entirely.

Read "Our Own World" to find out what happens when Clover and his criminal sidekick Opal set out to mastermind one very special final score.

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Lina Chern's debut novel *Play the Fool* won the 2024 Mary Higgins Clark Award and was nominated for the Anthony and Lefty Awards. Its follow-up, *Tricks of Fortune*, has been nominated for an Anthony Award. Lina's shorter work has appeared in *Mystery Weekly*, *The Marlboro Review*, *The Bellingham Review*, *Rhino*, *Black Fox Literary Magazine*, and is forthcoming in *TriQuarterly*. Lina has also written essays, trivia questions, word puzzles for a TV game show, paranormal romances, dialogue for your favorite comic book characters, award-winning movie reviews, and poems that have been published and read by up to dozens of people. She lives in the Chicago area with her family.