



Dark Chapter

Winnie M. Li

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NOMINATED FOR THE EDGAR AWARD FOR BEST FIRST NOVEL

Vivian is a cosmopolitan Taiwanese-American tourist who often escapes her busy life in London through adventure and travel. Johnny is a 15-year-old Irish teenager, living a neglected life on the margins of society.

On a bright spring afternoon in West Belfast, their paths collide during a horrifying act of violence.

In the aftermath, each is forced to confront the chain of events that led to the attack.

Inspired by true events, this is a story of the dark chapters and chance encounters that can irrevocably determine the shape of our lives.

Dark Chapter Details

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Author : Winnie M. Li

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From Reader Review Dark Chapter for online ebook

Barbara says

Although the book descriptions obscure the subject of this book, the blurbs on the back cover reveal that it is about a rape. Vivian Tan, a Harvard graduate in her late 20's works in London, in a job related to the film industry. She is invited to Belfast to the 10th anniversary of the Peace Accord. After all of the meetings, she decides to go for a hike in a park near West Belfast where she crosses paths with a 15-year-old Traveler Johnny Sweeney and suffers a violent sexual assault.

The author suffered a sexual assault herself. I am not sure who this book is for except perhaps as part of her own healing process. I rushed through the second half although I was tempted to discard it - not because I don't take the topic of such violence seriously but because it was relentless.

It is always tricky to write about characters who are members of marginalized communities and who are often stereotyped as criminals, thugs, thieves, and worse. Li consulted with several organizations representing the Traveler community. Yet despite this, I believe readers cannot walk away from this book seeing Johnny's crimes as the aberrations of an individual sociopath. Rather I believe they will reinforce prior stereotypes they've had of Travelers or if this is an unfamiliar community to them, they will finish the book with negative impressions of the community, and not just of Johnny.

Trigger warning The details of the assault are long and very violent. The police interviews and trial repeat them again. I honestly cannot recommend this book to anyone.

Abby Slater- Fairbrother says

This novel is loosely based around, the authors real-life sexual assault. I found this incredibly brave and it offered the reader an insight into the rape survivor's inner most private thoughts. This novel begins before the attack has taken place and ends 5 years after. It is written with a raw honesty and you genuinely feel the emotions, the protagonist Vivian goes through.

“They say events like this change your life forever”

This is the opening line to this novel and very much sums up the entire novel. We meet protagonist Vivian and we see, she is a young woman with a keen interest in travel and is slightly naive when it comes to the opposite sex.

We also meet soon to be rapist, Johnny. Whom lives a life of poverty, in a divided community in Ireland. His life is marred by his father's alcoholism, domestic violence and brother's criminality. As much as I was disgusted and horrified by Johnny's actions. I had the sense he was destined to a life behind bars.

Vivian has a delightful optimistic outlook on life. She is rather innocent in her views of people and their behaviour. I by no means mean this, as a negative towards her character. Women should feel safe to go hiking alone in the Irish countryside. I personally and unfortunately, grew up with childhood best friend, who would also go on to become a rape victim. I think this opened my eyes at a very young age, to the dangers that can lurk behind a man's intentions. I also think this has influenced the way in which I raise my own teenage daughter. But people are individuals and we all form our views/opinions via the life experiences we are made aware of.

This novel definitely provided much room for debate and discussion around key issues such as, rape culture and victim blaming. We see cases like Vivian's too often, played out over the media.

One thing I knew for certain, was that when Vivian and Johnny's lives finally collided, it would be brutal. The attack that is described in the novel, holds nothing back. It is a savage and vicious attack, one that shocks you to your core!

What is also shocking, is that this was committed by a boy of just 15 years of age. When the friendly charade performed by Johnny is fully unmasked, with the words "Do you like to have sex outdoors?".

My eyes closed with sheer dread!

The novel also goes on to detail the aftermath of the assault from Vivian's perspective. The physical examinations, injury/medical treatment and mental anguish. As Vivian struggles to accept that she is now a rape victim. She battles feelings of shame and disgust at herself. She struggles to find the words to break the news to friends and family.

There were moments where I put myself in her shoes and winced as I imagined the horror, of picking up that phone and calling my loved ones.

The trial eventually looms and the defendant chooses a not guilty plea, which will only serve to further torment the victim. Johnny appears to show no remorse and his narrative becomes much darker. As you become fully aware, of his broken and disillusioned outlook on life.

On the whole this novel is educational, emotional and possibly the most truthful depiction of rape as a central plot. I think the author has done a phenomenal job and I applaud her courageous approach to the subject. I am sure the writing process broke her heart several times, even if, in its entirety it may help her to heal. I shall finish this review with a quote from Vivian's thoughts, one that I felt summed up her experiences in Dark Chapter. 4*

"There will be violation upon violation"

E. Mellyberry says

Once in a while there comes a book that knocks you down, tears you apart, then puts you together again a much inspired woman. DARK CHAPTER does that. I ran out of post-its to mark the important words. I used my camera to snap every phrase that spoke to me but soon my phone was full with more than a hundred snapshots of this book. Every page is important. Every phrase is true, gripping, gut-wrenching, emotional, angry, powerful, strong. STRONG. This book, this story? STRONG. The voice? STRONG. ?

Trigger warning: rape and battery. If you think this might be painful, please do not read beyond this point. Though if you could, I encourage you to. This book heals. It won't be right away, but it will lead you from a dark place to the light. It will prepare you for the truth, for the reality. It's neither ugly or pretty. Truth is truth. Reality can be unfair and lack of compassion. It is what it is.

If other books mindfuck us with their twist and turn, this book punches me with its brutal truth. ?

"And then she realizes how ridiculously unfair this whole system is. She was the one who was walking along on her own when he did this to her. And then she has to wait almost a year to sit in front of a room full of strangers, tell them the humiliating truth, stand up to a sleazy-bag barrister trying to paint her as a villain-seductress, then listen to the boy make up this trash about her? Is this what we have to subject ourselves to, in order to get justice?" VIVIAN TAN

?

DARK CHAPTER gives me an unapologetic, uncensored picture of the aftermath. The damage and the pain

doesn't stop once you are rescued, or when the criminal is convicted.

The author has pushed the meaning of the word STRONG to a whole new level. I admire her and Vivian's strength. I admire the author's compassion in giving the assailant in this story a voice too. He's despicable but he has a voice and we hear it.

Rob Twinem says

This story is all the more astounding when you consider that it is based on the real life events that occurred to the author. I have never been more affected or more enthralled by the content of a novel or by its alternate voice method of presentation. Vivian Tan, independent and vivacious traveller, is in Belfast invited to contribute in the celebrations of the 10th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement. As a keen walker she plans to use the opportunity to explore the nearby Colin Glen Forest Park close to the city. She meets a young, seemingly innocent boy John Sweeney who continues to follow the hiker seeking a reaction from her as he attempts to strike up a friendly conversation. The situation develops in a frightening and unexpected manner when a pleasant exchange turns to a violent assault and uncontrollable lust ending in the rape of Mz Tan.

It is the telling of this story through the voices of the victim and the perpetrator that makes for compelling reading. A victim so traumatized by a violent act that her life from here on is changed irrevocably and a perpetrator totally unconcerned by the affect of his actions on the victim..."But they have no idea how far she is now from the person they knew a week ago. They just see her, hear her voice. But the real Vivian checked out days ago, and she doesn't know when she'll return.".... As we alternate quickly between the thoughts of Vivian and Sweeney we encounter the rape, the aftermath, the trial and the fallout. It is often so easy to read about a sexual assault and to dismiss very quickly, but the voice of Winnie Li, and her articulate literary presentation taking us from a solitary walk to her life today, (as the lines between Winnie and Vivian must surely be merged) is a meaningful, sombre and sad experience to me as a male reader.

An essential important read by a lady who I can only hold the greatest respect and admiration for. The scenes in the Northern Irish courtroom and the questioning that Vivian received at the hands of a well educated defence lawyer had me totally engrossed by its realism and authenticity (I work within the legal system) This is a novel that should be read by everyone and can only add to the understanding of a victim in a violent sexual attack, a victim with the courage to tell her story knowing that.... "One of these day, she tells herself, she'll be able to walk into a field on her own. An open field under the broad sky in the middle of the day. She'll be able to lie down on her back, feel the grass beneath her, the sun on her face, close her eyes and she will feel completely content. And she will feel no danger....." Many thanks to the good people at netgalley for a gratis copy in exchange for an honest review and that is what I have written.

Heidi says

If I had to choose only three words to sum up Li's debut novel Dark Chapter, it would be: compelling, well-written and courageous. Drawing on her own personal experiences, the author's account of her character's journey to reclaim her life after the traumatic assault and rape she suffered at the hands of her attacker is well drawn and authentic – as it is harrowing and disturbing. Some readers may find the scenes describing Vivian's rape confronting, but I thought they are refreshingly honest and brave. Her visceral account of events is not added for shock value, but to recount her character's experience in all its gritty reality. Vivian's

voice is natural and engaging, and she quickly drew me into the story. Having been in contact with victims of rape and assault through my work as an A&E nurse, the story really highlighted the long, ongoing journey these women face in trying to come to terms with the trauma and to move on from it despite the havoc it wreaked on their lives.

“The person she is now. The person she still can be. The person she always was.”

Personally, I felt the courtroom scenes especially harrowing, and am not surprised that many women shy away from laying charges just because they cannot face the additional burden of being in the media spotlight and under crossfire from the lawyers. How horrible to have to relive your worst nightmare, and having to justify your own actions, when you are the innocent party. Incredible, really, that our society allows the victims of rape and assault to be further traumatised like this!

“And then she realises how ridiculously unfair this whole system is. She was the one who was walking along on her own, when he did this to her. And then she has to wait almost a year to sit in front of a room full of strangers, tell them the humiliating truth, stand up to a sleaze-bag barrister trying to paint her as a villain-seductress and then listen to the boy make up this trash about her? Is this what we have to subject ourselves to, in order to get justice?”

Dark Chapter is told in two alternating voices – that of vivacious Vivian, setting out on a hike she has been looking forward to; and that of 15-year old Johnny Sweeney, a troubled boy who is about to destroy her trust and innocence forever. Whilst I am often not a fan of getting too much into the mind of the perpetrator in novels, Li’s book proved that – if executed the right way (i.e. to add depth, not shock value) – this approach can add a lot to the story. Whilst I found this rapist remorseless and lacking in insight, and could make no excuses for his actions, exploring his childhood and upbringing did sow a small seed of empathy for his troubled mind. I applaud the author for being able to present the perpetrator in such an honest light, when a lot of emotions must be tangled up in the story for her.

Focusing on the events surrounding a horrific assault and rape and the effects on the victim’s life afterwards, Dark Chapter is a story of courage, hope and moving forward. I loved Li’s writing, which is as unflinchingly honest as it is engaging. It is obvious that a lot of the author’s emotions were tied up in this story, and she conveys them effortlessly to the reader, giving us a true-to-life main protagonist that is so real she could be your friend, neighbour, relative. Although some might find it confronting in its honesty, I couldn’t put it down would recommend it highly to female and male readers alike. I hope to read a lot more from this talented author in future.

Thank you to Netgalley and the publisher for the free electronic copy of this novel and for giving me the opportunity to provide an honest review.

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Tracy Fenton says

Seriously I really don't think anything I have to say here does this book justice and I don't want to give this book the usual "riveting, gripping, page-turning" review because this is a book that everyone needs to read.

Dark Chapter is based on a true story and inspired by the authors own sexual assault and therefore every word written is brutal, raw and harrowing. Often when I write reviews I might refer to the characters or the twists or the atmosphere, but Dark Chapter is a book that doesn't require any of that in my opinion. This is a book that evoked powerful feelings from the opening page to the final chapter.

How did it make me feel? Well simply put I think I felt too many emotions to list them all. Firstly when reading Vivian's side of the story I was shocked, horrified, scared, traumatised and angry for her and with her throughout her story. Because the book is based on Winnie's real life attack I knew that Vivian's emotions and responses were real and that made everything raw. Her bravery in telling this story and making the reader feel her pain and horror is incredible and so intimate that you are able to feel everything Vivian's experiencing.

Reading Johnny's version of the events made me sick to my stomach, angry and ashamed that there are people in the world who think this behaviour is acceptable or normal.

There is very little I can add to this review except that it is a very brave and brutal story based on true events. A powerful and harrowing book which I know will stay with me for a very long time.

Robert Intrago says

A very good story about a rape and the effects the crime has on the perpetrator and the victim, but not truly a mystery. This book was nominated for an Edgar Award and after reading it you can see why. The beginning is a little confusing and it takes a little bit to unravel it. Once you get into the story it is page turning. The story is told from two perspectives: the perpetrator and the victim. I found the story of the perpetrator very enlightening as it delves into the life of "the travelers" in Ireland. The story of the victim is also revealing in the sense of the humiliation the person goes through at the hands of the system while physical evidence is being gathered and at trial. A very well written book with great character development. I found the character of the perpetrator quite good and believable.

Susan Hampson says

The title of this book is so very perfect and although to the reader it represent the very horrific and brutal facts of the story, for the author and assailant it is the dark chapters in their lives following the thirty minutes that they actual knew each other. It is a courageous story told by the author, herself the victim. The thing that I admire greatly about her is being able to not only tell her side of the story but also that of the young teenager that violated and raped her.

There is a back drop of both characters from when they were growing up, where their childhood years couldn't have been more different. Vivian confidant, educated and in a successful career loved walking and exploring, at times, in more remote areas. Johnny was a travellers son, being dragged up, for lack of a better

word, by his abusive father. His world was one of violence which he had witnessed between his father and mother. The stories from other lads about taking ‘what they wanted’ from girls as a right were regularly told to him. Then one day Johnny sees Vivian walking and both of their lives would be destroyed by what followed.

Winnie M Li, the author describes every frightening and terrifying action and thought that she experienced, her desperate pleas, her bargaining and quick thinking to ensure her survival. Then the thoughts of Johnny, how he sees the events, his right to do what he is doing and how he knows this is ‘what she wants too’. There was such an helplessness that I felt when I was reading this, a boy so damaged by how he was brought up actually thinking that this was normal, to the woman who I knew would never forget this day.

The court case that followed was just as horrific. The story though goes much further and describes how it affected the relationships of both Vivian and Johnny with their families and friends.

I truly admire this author that has had the courage to write about this terrible time in her life but the ability to look into the mind of this young man was remarkable. There is nothing tacky about this story, this is a detailed account of what happened. Truly courageous.

Andy Weston says

To award stars because of enjoying the book, or to award stars as recognition that it is an important piece of literature that is well written, that is the question.

This is almost impossible to enjoy as a novel, through Winnie Li’s writing is to be admired especially considering the she herself is a rape victim.

I have read a couple of books this year about the neglect of children and along with this, should you choose to read them, such books need to be spaced apart, with plenty of levity in between.

The perpetrator’s story is not any easier to handle here either. Johnny Sweeney is from an Irish Travelling community, has himself been physically abused and neglected, in that he has had no education. There can be no excuse for his actions, but by way of explanation it is of interest.

Not an easy read, though quite a quick one.

Sarah says

I received this from Legend Press to review as part of a blog tour (my spot is on the 14th I’m v excited!). So I’ll upload a full review after this point. Dark Chapter is unlike any book I’ve read, it’s brutal and truthful and gives a real insight in to the effects that sexual assault can have. It’s a tough read but it’s also an important one!

H.A. Leuschel says

An exceptionally courageous exploration of how different people’s life circumstances can mold them into who they become and cause a violent and devastating clash when they happen to meet in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Anna says

This book was painful and brutal yet simultaneously beautiful and necessary. I could not put it down and I stayed up too late past my bedtime to finish it. I hadn't read many detailed summaries before receiving an ARC from Netgalley (thank you to NetGalley and the publisher!) so I actually had no idea that the catalyst to the story was a rape. To be totally honest, I'm not sure I would have read the book had I known that rape was at the forefront. However, I'm incredibly glad that I read this. The strength of both the writing and the protagonist's journey was inspiring, and it's not often that I am so emotionally touched by a book. I hope readers don't avoid this book because of the topic, because there is a lot to be gained from this stunning debut. Knowing that it was very loosely based on the author's own experiences makes it even more meaningful. To the author: Thank you for writing this book. It is extremely important and you have my utmost respect for not shying away from any part of a traumatic experience, no matter how ugly or difficult. The raw honesty in your writing meant a lot to me and I am looking forward to hopefully more novels from you!

Michelle Scott says

When Vivian goes hiking alone in an unfamiliar part of Belfast, she meets 15-year-old Johnny and her life is never the same afterwards

I really struggled with this book and how to rate it. Usually, I rate a book according to how much I enjoyed it, but this book was not an enjoyable read. In fact, it should come with a warning that it contains intense images of rape and violence. Not that it is a voyeuristic or lurid novel. Far from it. *Dark Chapter* is an intense, gritty drama about one woman's journey from victim to hero. Still, it's not my typical read, and I think it was mislabeled by the publisher as a mystery/thriller.

I'm not one to give out five-star reviews on a whim. Books must earn that rating. What made this book a five-star was its amazing writing. Its stark style works well with the subject matter. Li draws the reader into the story and doesn't let her go. *Dark Chapter* is a compelling story, and I couldn't put it down. I was rooting for the heroine the entire time.

This book offers an unflinching view of an unspeakable crime. It won't be for every reader, but it is definitely a novel of great worth.

Rob Twinem says

This story is all the more astounding when you consider that it is based on the real life events that occurred to the author. I have never been more affected or more enthralled by the content of a novel or by its alternate voice method of presentation. Vivian Tan, independent and vivacious traveller, is in Belfast invited to contribute in the celebrations of the 10th anniversary of the Good Friday agreement. As a keen walker she plans to use the opportunity to explore the nearby Colin Glen Forest Park close to the city. She meets a young, seemingly innocent boy John Sweeney who continues to follow the hiker seeking a reaction from her as he attempts to strike up a friendly conversation. The situation develops in a frightening and unexpected

manner when a pleasant exchange turns to a violent assault and uncontrollable lust ending in the rape of Mz Tan.

It is the telling of this story through the voices of the victim and the perpetrator that makes for compelling reading. A victim so traumatized by a violent act that her life from here on is changed irrevocably and a perpetrator totally unconcerned by the affect of his actions on the victim..."But they have no idea how far she is now from the person they knew a week ago. They just see her, hear her voice. But the real Vivian checked out days ago, and she doesn't know when she'll return.".... As we alternate quickly between the thoughts of Vivian and Sweeney we encounter the rape, the aftermath, the trial and the fallout. It is often so easy to read about a sexual assault and to dismiss very quickly, but the voice of Winnie Li, and her articulate literary presentation taking us from a solitary walk to her life today, (as the lines between Winnie and Vivian must surely be merged) is a meaningful, sombre and sad experience to me as a male reader.

An essential important read by a lady who I can only hold the greatest respect and admiration for. The scenes in the Northern Irish courtroom and the questioning that Vivian received at the hands of a well educated defence lawyer had me totally engrossed by its realism and authenticity (I work within the legal system) This is a novel that should be read by everyone and can only add to the understanding of a victim in a violent sexual attack, a victim with the courage to tell her story knowing that...."One of these day, she tells herself, she'll be able to walk into a field on her own. An open field under the broad sky in the middle of the day. She'll be able to lie down on her back, feel the grass beneath her, the sun on her face, close her eyes and she will feel completely content. And she will feel no danger....." Many thanks to the good people at netgalley for a gratis copy in exchange for an honest review and that is what I have written.

Sharon says

Vivian and Johnny, two very different people from two very different backgrounds whose paths are on course for collision. In The Dark Chapter, Winnie Li takes us on a journey that changed her life forever. This is a story based on reality, it's a tough and emotional read but it is also a story of strength, resilience and a journey to recovery. It is a story that needs to be read.

It is harrowing, and despite being fiction, it is a raw read as we know that the author is also a survivor of rape. This might not be the whole of her story but it is written from the heart and the perspective of someone who has lived through this experience and so it is difficult not to feel that emotional connection with Vivian. The prologue is so intense as the narrator watches herself from a distance taking a journey she is powerless to stop. Right from the very beginning I was drawn in and in doing so was taken on the journey alongside Vivian all of the way.

The book follows alternate chapters in which Vivian and Johnny's lives are traced leading up to the event that would change their lives forever; the very ordinariness of their lives and experiences, how events and people shaped the people they became, was a powerful and tense read. It was impossible to read it and not feel the emotions that Vivian felt. From start to finish was an emotional rollercoaster.

When Johnny was narrating his story it was difficult not to feel conflicted; as a human being watching the life of a young boy being shaped in such a way that it would have been nigh on impossible for him not to take the wrong path in life, it was hard not to feel sorrow for him, not to want to lay the blame on his upbringing, the discrimination faced by travellers, but it was also gut wrenching as I knew that this story was being written by a woman who had experienced the trauma that Johnny was about to inflict on her. We know

that this is not Winnie Li's attacker she is writing about as she knows nothing about him other than he was from the travelling community; he pled guilty and so there was no trial, no background information or defence lawyer trying to silence her truth. Despite the conflict mentioned above, it was impossible to empathise with him as he played out the part that was to change this woman's life forever.

Some may ask is Winnie giving the rapist a voice or is she using fiction and writing as a therapeutic process? Having met and listened to Winnie speak, I'd say it was the latter, it is a courageous and compassionate woman who can take her experience and write about it from the perspective of the survivor as well as the perpetrator. I would say that fiction plays an important part in opening up conversations about rape and about violence; understanding why someone has done something is not condoning the act but it does help shatter the silence around the subject which is what we need to be doing; it encourages the conversations that we all need to be having.

The loneliness of Vivian struck me to the core, as she came to terms with having to censor her story to protect the listeners, to having to protect others from her pain: but also the sheer strength of her as an individual, a survivor and a voice that needed to be heard.

The courtroom scenes were written so well that I found myself sitting in the room watching the wheels of justice churning, I felt Vivian's pain as she was left feeling exposed once more, reliving the rape under cross-examination, her pain yet her determination to see the process through in order to see justice done. It laid bare conflicts she felt, should she cry? Should she be strong and composed? How do the public expect a survivor of rape to behave? All these questions and thoughts that no individual should ever have to be thinking.

I wept reading this book, not because I think her life is ruined but I wept that she has had to go through this pain to write this novel, to write a novel where the research done was based on her experience, I wept that she was strong enough to tell this story and to carry on speaking out for those who have not yet been able to find their voice
