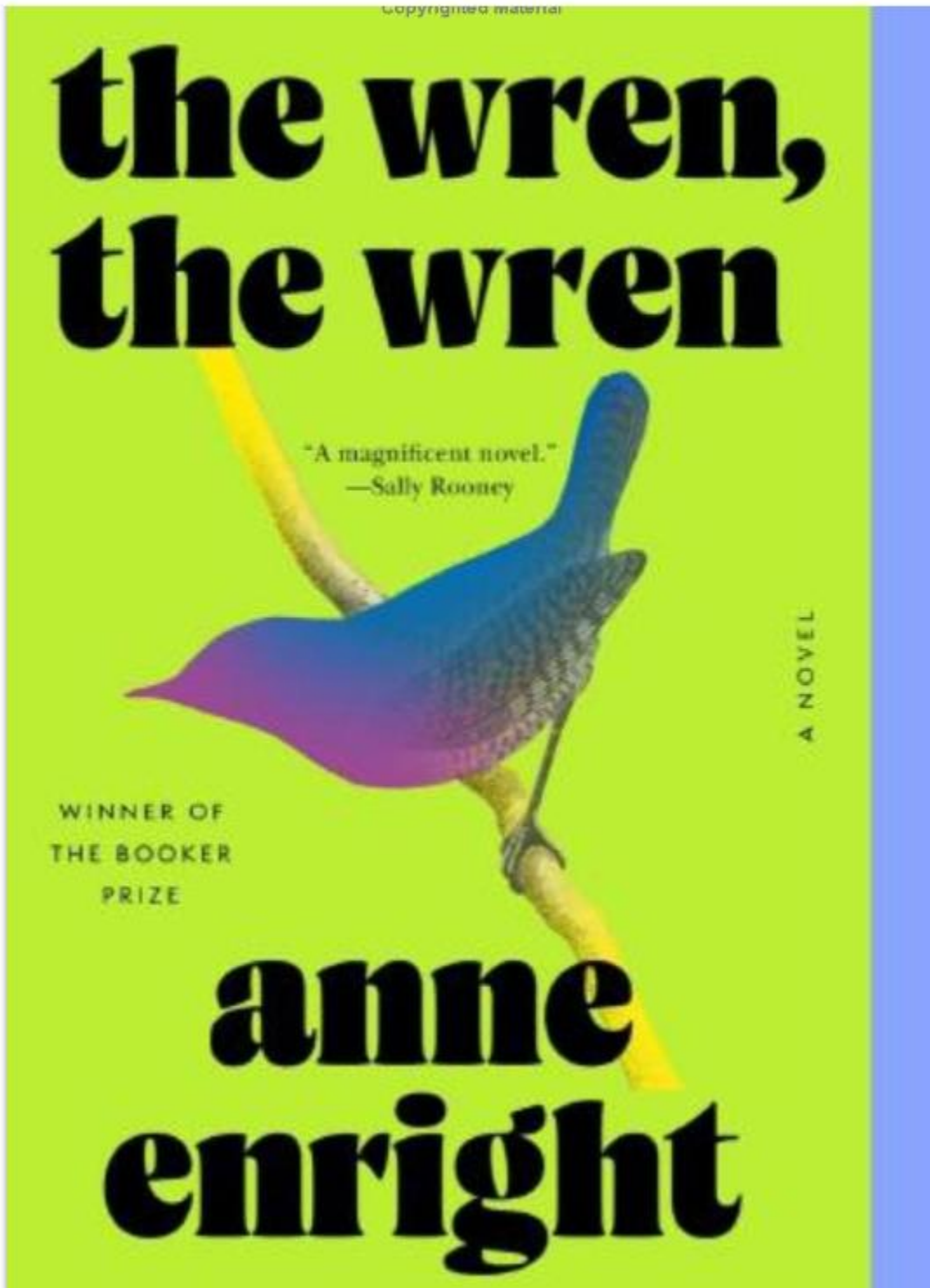


THE WREN, THE WREN: A NOVEL



NELL

THERE IS A psychologist in Nevada called Russell T. Hurlburt who is interested in the different ways people think. In 2009, he fitted a young woman called Melanie with a beeper that went off randomly during the day, prompting her to record everything in her awareness at that moment, and she later reconstructed these mental events for his research.

On the third day of Melanie's experiment, as her boyfriend was asking her a question about insurance, she was trying to remember the word 'periodontist'. On the fourth day, she was having a strong urge to go scuba diving. On the sixth day, she was picking flower petals from the sink while hearing echoes of the phrase 'nice long time'.

Dr Hurlburt says that there are great variations in the way our inner lives play themselves out in our heads. 'My research says that there are a lot of people who don't ever naturally form images, and then there are other people who form very florid, high-fidelity, Technicolor, moving images.' Some people have inner lives dominated by speech, body sensations or emotions, and yet others by 'unsymbolized thinking' that can take the form of wordless questions like, 'Should I have the ham sandwich or the roast beef?'

I find this experiment very useful and attractive. No explanations are sought or given. Melanie thinks this way because that is the way that Melanie thinks. There may be no reason for Melanie to have the mind of a poet, with her sink full of faded petals, and her inner ear enjoying the words 'nice long time', where other people would see used teabags and think 'my life is turning to shit'.

I wonder what was going through her boyfriend's mind at these moments.

Let's get insured!

or:

Why is she ignoring me?

or:

Oh my god her breasts.

or:

I need to insure this bitch before I murder her, goddammit.

or:

If we switched providers there could be significant reduction in costs. Perhaps if I made a spreadsheet she would see the potential risks and also the savings to be made.

or:

If I talk about insurance I don't have to think about my erection.

If I talk about insurance I don't have to think about my failure to earn enough money, in a system that screws you at every turn.

If I talk about insurance I don't have to think about death, except usefully.

I am usefully in love, and I love being useful.

I want nice, I want 'yes'.

I want to die now, all the time, and also in her arms.

*

Don't be silly, Melanie's boyfriend is, of course, thinking about the football. Because this is what men tell you they are thinking, if you ever ask them. And of course these men are telling the truth. Although, under the football ... something else stirring, some big old lizard with a flickering tongue. Somewhere under the football. The painful pad of his right thumb, a slight itch on the bony bit of his skull. And under the itch, or beyond the itch, an opening. A gap. A place. The bang of a blue sky on some far planet (he is a boy, remember) where three moons rise and set.

And he has the ball, he runs with the ball, he's there, he's done it! Touchdown! Yes! Under the football, he is thinking, Vindication! Thousands of men surging as one man from their plastic stadium chairs, Yes!

Melanie, meanwhile, is sucking at her dental implant, which feels a little loose, and this tiny sound is just terrible for her boyfriend who is very sensitive to anatomically internal noises, especially ones inside other people, especially inside their mouths. Melanie's boyfriend is very acutely aware of the tongues and the saliva of other human beings and sometimes also the dog, at night, when it is licking itself. Apples are the worst. It is as though the slurp and chomp of other people's mastication happens inside his brain – no respecting that line between his inner life and the outside world. It is a complete invasion, like torture almost – while he is trying to sort out the post. Trying to sort the goddamn insurance.

But you know.

Melanie and her boyfriend. I wish them well. I think she is a dreamer and he is a treasure, he keeps them both safe. And in time – in time – they will each learn exactly what the other one thinks.

He thinks:

soft

that smell
She thinks:
a nice long time

We don't walk down the same street as the person walking beside us. All we can do is tell the other person what we see. We can point at things and try to name them. If we do this well, our friend can look at the world in a new way. We can meet.

When I began thinking about all this I was interested in empathy, like it's the solution (and it is! it is!) to pretty much everything. I thought about gender and empathy, religion and empathy, the evolutionary benefits of empathy. I had a big beautiful cake in my head called 'Feeling the Pain of Others' and I sliced it this way and that because I thought that emotion is the bridge between people, sentiment crosses space, sympathy is a gas, exhaled by one, inhaled by the other. Empathy! It's just like melting.

We can merge, you know. We can connect. We can cry at the same movie. You and I.

But some people can't do this – really quite complicated – thing. There is a gap.

These days, I think there is a real gap between me and the next person, there is a space between every human being. And it is not a frightening space. The empty air which exists between people might be crossed by emotion, but it might not. You need something else, or you need something *first*. This is the thing Russell T. Hurlburt was talking about when he discussed different kinds of mental experience. People are different and they think differently. Now, I think the word we need is 'translation'.

It took me a long time to get to this point of happy separateness. When I was a child, I thought we were all the