



Wet Moon by Sophie Campbell

[Contemporary Fiction]



"My new thing is no more secrets. All they do is mess shit up."

The darkest hours aren't necessarily at midnight.

Rarely have I read the myriad, complex insecurities of diverse late teens and early 20s laid so artlessly and recognisably bare; and that artlessness is so very rare.

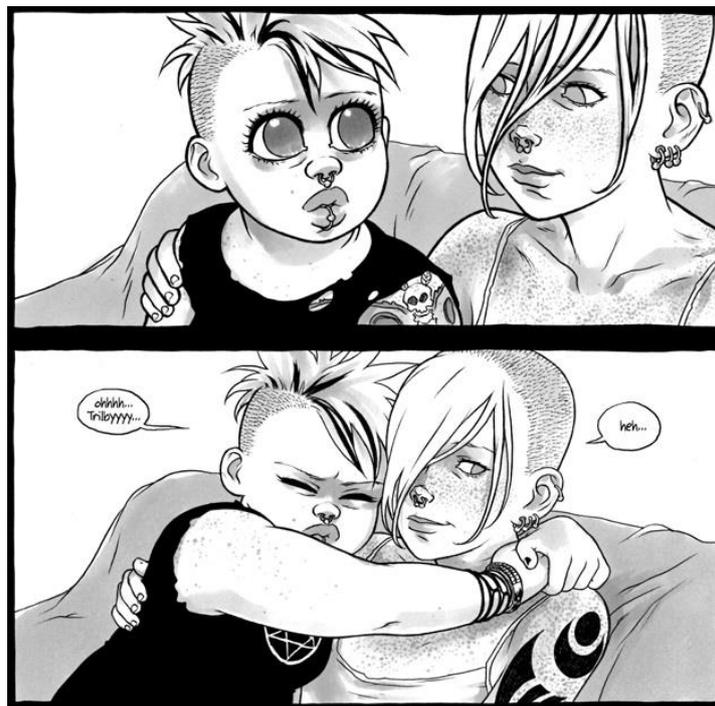
On its first appearance in 2004 I glibly yet succinctly summarised WET MOON as GHOST WORLD for Goths with piercings, pvc and hair dye. That it would develop into something more psychologically chilling was hinted at early on, but I singularly failed to spot its source. As, I'm afraid, do the cast.

Beside the bayou, term is about to kick off for a group of awkward, hesitant, second-guessing, slightly paranoid girls at college, most of them unsure of themselves and their relationships. Audrey – Black, beautiful and gay – is the exception, but Trilby – pale, freckled, Tank-Girl hair falling over a nose-ring and braces – provides a weighty counterbalance by being both relentlessly and remorselessly callous, selfish, moody and disloyal, dismissing anyone's misgivings with "Who cares?" while caring very much that no one walks in her watching Star Trek. She's so two-faced that she'll brief against a friend five seconds before flashing a smile in their direction. But the title's primary focus is Cleo Lovedrop: more open and honest, and therefore vulnerable. She constantly checks herself out in the mirror, and changes her hair style back and forth based on approval or disapproval or anticipation of either.



Body image and explorations of sexuality are as central to the all-inclusive series as vulnerability and friendships, and, refreshingly, Sophie Campbell's eye is for more individualistic forms which she makes such tender and seductive art of. Not for a long time, for example, did I realise that Cleo was so remarkably short. As Campbell refines her craft, her lines grow softer, silkier, her forms even fuller, while her command of tones becomes rich and delicious. Cleo's eyes widen first in doting and doubt and then into enormous, smitten pools of liquid love

Also ahead of its time was some of the cast's revealing attempts to engage with early iterations of Social Media, albeit in relatively closed forums. Campbell captures the naive illusion of privacy to perfection there as well as implying its potential pitfalls should word get around, just as she does the intimacy of Cleo's genuinely private, hand-doodled diary entries. It's psychologically spot-on: the questioning, the self-doubts, and the way in which, in a letter to yourself, you can meanderingly think your worries through on the page in the hope of a better future – or as a means of self-justification. Amongst other truths of youth: bonding over bands and tattoos, embarrassment over enthusiasms sequestered from your friends; the sharing of secrets, the betrayal of secrets; and not quite knowing if you're going out with someone or not: hoping desperately that you are, but not wanting to fuck things up with presumption or the first move.



Campbell is a master of the emotional rollercoaster ride, not just of heartache, but in subtly deployed and stealthily ramped-up, hard dramatic irony. For all along there have been intimations of horror lurking beneath the surface, as if something was simmering in the swamp all around them. But it's been stewing much closer to home, grinding its teeth with a festering, barely contained, seething psychosis before erupting in an act of extreme violence which made everyone I know truly wince.

But scarce is the series which devotes *an entire volume* of seven to moments of quiet, intimate closure and reconciliation amongst its dazed and bewildered survivors born of self-reflection long after its climax. Reconciliation arguably aside, it's a far more accurate reflection of reality.