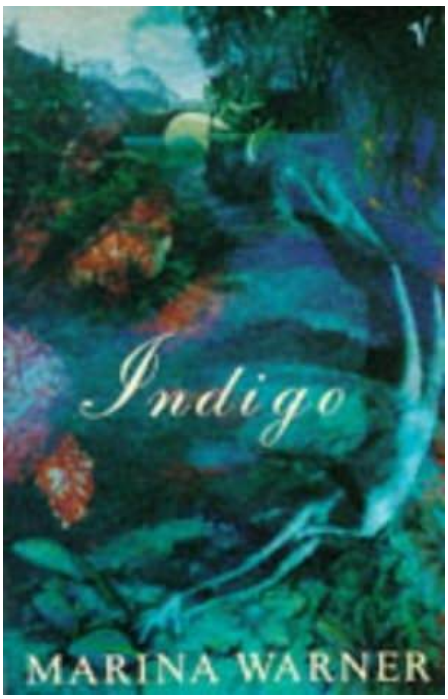

Indigo

Marina Warner

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Indigo is a shimmering, lyrical novel about power and transformation. Inspired by Shakespeare's magic play The Tempest, prizewinning writer Marina Warner refashions the drama to explore the restless conflicts between the inhabitants of a Caribbean island and the English family who settled it. From that violent moment in the seventeenth century when the English buccaneer Kit Everard arrives at Enfant-Beate, the islanders' fate is intertwined, often tragically, with that of the Everards. The voices that map the fortunes of those born, raised, or landed on the island pass from the wise woman Sycorax in the past, a healer and a dyer of indigo, to the native nanny Serafine Killebree, who transforms them to fairy tales for the two little Everard girls in London in the 1950s. At the center of the modern-day story is the relationship between these two young women: Xanthe, the golden girl, brash and confident, and Miranda, self-conscious and uneasy, who struggles with her Creole inheritance. When Xanthe decides they should return to Enfant-Beate to restore their fortunes, she binds the family closer to its past and awakens a history marked with passions and portents that takes the two women on very different paths of discovery. Sensuous and earthy, humorous and magical, Indigo is a novel of powerful originality and imagination.

Indigo Details

Date	:	Published September 1st 1992 by Simon & Schuster
ISBN	:	9780671701567
Author	:	Marina Warner
Format	:	Hardcover 384 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction

From Reader Review Indigo for online ebook

Robert says

Potentially this would have been the greatest idea for a novel – ever. Imagine an author explaining the roots of a Jamaican family , while using Shakespeare’s The Tempest as a backdrop. Also now and then there are chapters dedicated to storytelling. Sounds great? Unfortunately in reality this was a mighty disappointing read.

The book opens up properly in post war London where two Jamaican immigrant families are coming to grips with their race. We find out in one long interlude that their ancestors were the first governors of a Jamaican island that was inhabited by the witch Sycorax, her son Caliban and the spirit Ariel (here Warner takes liberties with The Tempest and actually devotes a lot to Sycorax’s background) The governors destroy everything and take over the island.

We jump to the present day and the families now are spread out and their daughters actually return to the Caribbean to find out about their past.

Like I mentioned before great idea but I did not like the execution, I found Warner’s style boring and I couldn’t care about the characters, Although the first hundred pages or so are very promising I struggled to keep myself from drifting off.

Russell says

Didn't enjoy this at all, had a real problem getting into it ....

B says

I was sceptical before reading because of all the negative comments about the story dragging out. I think the book was wonderful, a perfect complement to Fantastic Metamorphosis and From Beast to Blonde and beautifully written. I only wish I'd heard Sycorax speak more, but I suppose that's idealistic. Read this if you're interested in black feminist interpretations of fairy tales (even though this is by a white feminist).

Shonna Froebel says

A little slow. Analogy to the Tempest by Shakespeare.

Ophelia says

Having loved The Tempest, this novel is another breath of fresh air. It is beautifully written, so much detail

and seeping with history and knowledge - an absolute delight to read. Loved how you saw characters from the play come into their own, especially Sycorax, who isn't mentioned in detail in the play. Novels like these always help me to deepen my interest for the original text, in this case The Tempest, which is one of if not my favorite play by Shakespeare. Really liked it, awesome stuff.

Tessa says

I fell in love with this story long before I started reading it. As a history/lit major, Shakespeare fanatic and amateur genealogist, any blurb with the words ‘Tempest,’ ‘blood-lines,’ ‘fairytale’ and ‘colonial scars’ is enough to win me over. As predicted, it turned out to be a very engaging read.

Indigo is set in two distinct places in two very different periods of time. The primary narrative tells the story of Miranda: a tiny twig on a complex family tree of once-glorious, red-headed, cricket bat wielding colonists who settled the imaginary Caribbean Island Enfant-Béate in the Seventeenth Century. The past haunts the grey London streets of Miranda’s childhood; it is ever-present in the stories of her black nurse Serafine, the bickering between her poor, proud parents, and the aura of light surrounding her golden-white sister/aunt Xanthe. Warner then plunges us 350 years into the past, taking us back to the island and weaving a rich historical-mythical tale of its native peoples and their displacement. The novel finally returns to Twentieth Century Paris, where we witness the adult Miranda struggling to make peace with her family’s turbulent past.

This book has a lot of strong points. Importantly, Warner succeeds in tackling serious questions about colonialism whilst keeping her book upbeat, fascinating and completely readable. Her weaving of history and myth is rendered faultlessly and is almost Carter-esque in its delivery. The tone and style of her writing really appealed to me. She is especially good at evoking a sense of place; I was particularly moved by the image of the Chinese restaurants in London (“syrupy mangoes and sticky vermilion pork pieces, as well as ivory pagodas and lacy balls carved within lacy balls, and lychees of mother-of-pearl veined flesh so delicate it would defeat even their nimble carvers’ skills at counterfeiting”...wow) and the almost painfully beautiful description of the luscious tropical island. My only teeny-tiny gripe is that the third section lacked some of the force of the first two – I’d been glued to the page for 200 pages and then felt my attention waning slightly. Minor issues aside, this is a wonderful, generous, entertaining, intelligent book and wholly deserves to be better known.

Kathy says

I wanted to like this book because, really, I want to applaud anyone with the ambition to use a Shakespeare play as the starting point for a novel. And this novel starts off well. I found the first half of it to be interesting and engaging, but unfortunately it seemed to lose its way somewhere and I ended up thinking that this is really a 250-page book that's been stretched to nearly 400. The other thing that began to bug me was that it does not really have anything very original to say. If you are familiar with books by Jean Rhys, VS Naipaul and other Caribbean writers, then you won't find anything new here.

Syd says

Your basic historical novel dealing with colonialism. It seems the book was a bit too ambitious, and it felt very incomplete on two many of the subjects that were introduced.

Sandro Eich says

I don't know whether it is just my language abilities or the way Warner narrates this story but I simply cannot follow the plot. Although I have read The Tempest and know that Indigo is supposed to be a retelling I gave up on this. Yet, I'm open to picking it up again some time.

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scarlettraces says

finished it with an 'is that it?' feeling, though whether the lack was in me or the text i couldn't say. it *did* have that distinct post-colonial didacticism i remember so fondly from my student days, which may be why i couldn't be bothered thinking about it in any depth. some fine passages though.

Renske says

I didn't like this book. I thought it was very longwinded, as it just went on an on. After 250 pages I gave up reading because it simply didn't seem to stop and I felt I had to really struggle through the novel. Reading just took up too much precious time and eventually I lost interest in the novel.

Zanna says

This is a very literary book, that had me excitedly making notes. I first added it to my TBR when I read *Wide Sargasso Sea*, inspired by the anticolonial 'writing back' concept. This book writes back to *The Tempest*, giving voices to Sycorax and 'Caliban', and expanding their world. Warner seeks to allow far more space than Shakespeare to challenge the genocidal storytelling of white supremacy, going beyond outrage (the shocked posture of white guilt) to explore magic and mystery, decentreing white, patriarchal ways of knowing and being. By way of review I will attempt to point out and sometimes examine some of these decolonial gestures.

Warner's characterisation is creative and skilful; she is adept at making the text do more than one this at a time. Serafine, a black Caribbean woman who helps Miranda's impoverished upper class family, enlivens her vivid, poetic, unconventional storytelling to the young girl with brilliant imitation and punctuates its sensuous frankness with conservative gender policing: 'something ladies should never do'. Miranda herself bargains with god for peace between her parents in versions of that weird Christian zest for austerity and self-deprivation, forgoing her favourite dessert, putting newspaper in her shoes to hurt her feet. Miranda's father, Kit, has mixed heritage and though usually read as white, was teased for his colouring at school. Miranda is described by Serafine as 'high yellow' and as she ages, constantly shifts her relationship to her

blackness/whiteness. Unlike her father, she is able to confront her own racism and her openness is rewarded, she does not become a 'Maroon' unable to feel a sense of belonging.

Kit's father Ant is a decendant of the white man principally responsible for the colonisation of the island Serafine comes from and evokes richly in her stories. This is the source of the family's wealth and prestige, including Ant's fame-granting prowess in the extremely popular sport 'flinders', invented on the island, which reenacts and ritualises the colonists account of their expropriation and massacre. Kit is the child of Ant's earlier marriage; he is now married to Gillian who has recently given birth to Miranda's aunt Xanthe (Greek 'golden', as she recognises when she later takes the name 'Goldie', apparently rejecting the sign of eurocentric classism and its connotations of elitism).

Gillian is conventionally racist, but by the time this is made clear Warner has already created sympathy with her, emotionally nudging the reader to confront our own racism and complicities. Kit responds to her remarks (which she attempts to sanitise with 'not that I'm prejudiced') with a smile and a raise of the eyebrow 'but did not gainsay his stepmother', reminding us of the uses of power, since Gillian's husband is Kit's financial supporter. By the end of her Christening party, an ancient 'good fairy' godmother (who is also a princess - what I love about this book is its magpie-eyed crafting of fantasy textures from the fabric of reality) has wished Xanthe **heartless**, and cursed by Miranda's mother, who turns up univited wearing the mantle of the wicked witch in the form of immodest attire and a lot of water to be **insatiable**. This is hardly a subtle hint at her future destructive powers, but I found this book very unpredictable for one so heavily loaded with foreshadowing!

Like Serafine, the black train guard brings Miranda bodily comfort and security. Warner demonstrates how important this is to a child, the deep effect it has on emotions. The fact that these comforting services are rendered by black people draws attention to the significance of white comfort in the progress/stasis of race relations. Similarly Gillian and Ant fight over Serafine, him wanting to keep her in their service because she makes him comfortable. She makes Gillian uncomfortable, so she wishes to replace her with a white 'English' girl, someone not 'savage'. Miranda loves Serafine and wants her attention. None of these white people arguing over her considers Serafine's own thoughts and feelings about her work.

The novel changes colour (I love this device; instead of the names of the game, the flags of houses, arms and insignia, we are guided by sense data, the living island, beads on Serafine's thread) to speak in the voice of Sycorax. Until this point we have been led to assume Serafine and the train guard are the original people of the island, 'delineated by Kit's nauseatingly and ironically patronising compliment 'you're a fine people'. The sleight of hand that erases displaced first inhabitants by declaring 'native' black diasporas imported for slavery white-washes the double atrocity of colonisation. At first I worried that Warner rewrites the myth of the vanishing native, passing over this old trick with minimal narrative attention (glossing the unknown), but I doubt my judgement: my own whiteness causes me to get stuck in the zone of self-absolving outrage here, demanding rigorous truth-telling while remaining insensitive to the emotional landscape of exilic black homeland in the Caribbean. Miranda finds a stone that looks ambiguously as if it has been carved and reflects 'it was common knowledge that the original islanders had left no trace of themselves'. Warner thus refuses to provide me with the proof, the documentation that whiteness so often demands. Her white characters can't access the trace she has traced through the objective study of artefacts, only through imaginative connection, such as Serafine's tales.

The voices of Africans enter the text at this point from the far side of death. Laughingly, the drowned imagine their bodies feeding the sea and land, taking consolation from the cycle of life. However, this disturbing instrumentalisation of their bodies is disrupted by their merrymaking, as they creatively conjure new life. Their conversation and Sycorax's overhearing signify the text's shaking loose from European

rationalist epistemology and the mechanistic viewpoint that denies spirit worlds and understands lifeless substances of matter, be they gold, indigo, cloth or flesh, through economic measures

Dulé, later called Caliban by Europeans, is the first African to live on the island, and he comes without culture, yet he is different to Sycorax and her people in his approach to time and history. Sycorax identifies Dulé's apprehension as similar to the Europeans'. Rather than positing a genetic memory here, Warner is suggesting that an awareness of being *cut* off from rootedness in land and community forces the creation of history as a line that can be broken, and that must seek redemption or completion by journeying into a future, while

> the indigenous islanders could [see] the time and space they occupied as a churn or bowl, in which substances and essences were tumbled and mixed, always returning, now emerging into personal form, now submerged into the mass in the continuous present tense of existence, as in one of the vats in which Sycorax brewed the indigo

Here then is one of the metaphors indigo offers: the tonalities of time and being, shades of meaning.

(I loved how Warner amuses herself and me with Chaucerian vocabulary in the C17th section, dropping in such spicy words as 'swived' so deftly you might not even need to look them up. Do look that one up though - I think we ought to bring it back)

The original, C17th Kit, lead coloniser, has a cast and pitch of religious devotion that allows him to reassure himself that whatever he does is god's work. It's necessary to realise that the profit motive clearly driving colonisation was readily linked to Christian righteousness by the idea of the divine right of kings, the holy sanction of nation and the racial self-concept of Christians. The Europeans saw themselves as god's chosen and therefore whatever brought them prosperity and glory was good. This ideology and some of its consequences are discussed here. Kit hopes vaguely for the 'salvation' (conversion) of the islanders but makes no evangelical efforts. Meanwhile, he doesn't have a shadow of a scruple about exploiting African people as slaves to grow tobacco, cotton and sugar, referring to them in letters to his 'gentle' female cousin as 'studs' and 'brood mares' and praising their strength and resilience as he might any other machine, as if they can have no souls.

Through the eyes of the islanders, escaped Africans and deserters, the colonisers are seen differently. The 'tallow-men' are childishly stupid. They know nothing about cultivation and seem incapable of learning, and no medical skill whatsoever exists among them. They would be totally helpless without assistance. They are faithless, routinely breaking promises.

Warner explicitly notes that slaves suffer 'at the order' of white women. She contrasts events with hideously distorted white-washed accounts. Miranda and friends in Paris play a sensuous drinking game with sugar cubes; Warner emphasises thus that **slavery is not over** and that the history of colonialism lies heavy on the present, on the backs of the colonised, dense under the bellies of the coloniser, still floating in the cream of a thick liquid, in all our minds like fog. She critiques the appropriative, distancing gaze of photography after Sontag. References abound... when is the annotated edition coming?

Whites in conversation discuss the fate of the island saying the people are 'good-natured' but 'hopeless'. There's never any suggestion that people might try to change the world instead of the 'romantics' and 'good natured but hopeless' people who just want to live and love and laugh to their own rhythm. Miranda is made to look childish and foolish for objecting to this standpoint, but the stories of Sycorax and Serafine, Dulé and Ariel, which she is unable to call forth, show her to be right. To put aside ideals and join Sy slimeball, carefree Kit and heartless Xanthe is to embrace complicity in the disposal of the island to the profit of the

descendants of the colonists - this is what we accept with the status quo.

Xanthe's gruesome pictures in the hotel she designs made me think of the gruesome opulence I sometimes see in private spaces belonging to very rich people. Bell hooks points out in her essay 'Beauty Laid Bare: Aesthetics in the Ordinary' (and in much of her work) that encounters with beauty can be sustaining and transformative, seeking to extend the relevance of art appreciation to working class black folks, and this seems to be inverted in the privileged desire to consume images of violence - the aesthetic of fascism. I'm hoping to understand this better through further reading...

Solitude is created by the violent othering of difference. Although there are many deeply felt relationships here, mainly between women, each of the main characters has to respond to a state of imposed isolation. For me this is in each case a state of colonisation, the sense of deprivation that makes Dulé climb a ladder into the air. The awkward later chapters of the book reflect the unsatisfactoriness of everything visible from this absurd position, yet Sycorax's sanction makes me more uneasy. I felt this narrative submitted too readily to the broken line of its history.

Tomcat says

i found this a little hard to get into & it felt a little clunky with the attempts to create fictitious scenarios & sports that parralleled those things in the real world... but that being said, i finally did enjoy the novel. i especially enjoyed the dream like / dreamtime like parts of the book that reflected the island culture. these parts really flowed & captured the imagination

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Morag says

I found this book disappointing as I progressed through it. The half which is about the mythical island and its early inhabitants was great, with some beautiful writing and vivid characters. The second half of the book has a cast of late twentieth century people who are all deeply annoying. I found myself unable to sympathise with any of these middle class twits who are all paranoid. I nearly gave up, but persevered to a sort of messy conclusion that felt unsatisfactory.

Elena Sala says

INDIGO, set on a fictional Caribbean island, draws on Shakespeare's THE TEMPEST to dissect issues such as colonialism, slavery and exploitation. There is a subtle interweaving of fiction and fact, myth and history, fantasy and realism in this novel.
The plot is loosely that of THE TEMPEST retold from the perspective of Miranda, the daughter, rather than from the father, Prospero.
There are two stories being told. The first starts just before the British take over the island. Sycorax is a counsellor and healer who also develops the technology of indigo dyeing, which the British will steal from her. She is joined by a Caliban and an Ariel. Caliban is Dulé, the baby of African slaves who have been thrown overboard a slave ship and survived thanks to Sycorax. Ariel is the daughter of Arawaks who have been captured but subsequently died.
Things start to go wrong when the British under Kit Everard arrive. Everard likes to think of himself as a

good Christian but he sees the ‘savages’ as inferior and the island ripe for exploitation.
The second story concerns his descendants, who now live in London. Sir Anthony Everard is an old-fashioned gentleman. His son Kit, named after his ancestor, has a daughter called Miranda. Kit’s Creole mother drowned when Kit was a boy. Now Sir Anthony has married Gillian, a British young woman, with whom he has a daughter called Xanthe. Eventually, Xanthe marries a smooth entrepreneur who works in the hotel business and wishes to impose a global culture in the Caribbean. Predictably, a new episode of colonialism is repeated, though this time the key factors are not sugar and slavery, but tourism. And things start to go wrong again.
INDIGO is an interrogation of western arrogance and a celebration of the wisdom it ignores; it is also a novel about the consequences of appropriation, in both the physical and ideological senses.
Marina Warner's work has always focused around the ways that myths, fairy tales and symbols continue to resonate in modern culture. This novel is a brilliant example of her work, a must read for all readers who love Shakespeare's THE TEMPEST. And for those interested in colonialism and myth.
