

Tracy Letts's *Bug*¹: A Plot Full of Paranoia – or Is It?
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Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean there's no one out to get you. In Tracy Letts's creepy-crawly drama *Bug*, the primary characters are drug-addicted, lonely, and very likely deranged. They think there's a government conspiracy against them. The audience might scoff, but then there are some other factors coming into play that make us wonder.

Agnes White is a lonely 44-year-old alcoholic, drug-addicted waiter living in an Oklahoma motel room. Her abusive, violent ex-husband has recently been let out of the slammer and wants to pick up where they left off before he was sent up. Agnes's friend, R.C., introduces her one evening to Peter Evans, a Gulf War veteran to whom Agnes finds herself taking a shine. He moves in with her, more or less.

There's something odd about Peter. Lacking in social graces, he is unusually suspicious, well-read, and smart. The first sign we see of his potential paranoia is when they hear a cricket in the room and decide it must be hiding in the smoke alarm. Agnes asks Peter to take the alarm apart to find and release the cricket. "They're dangerous," Peter says of alarms. "They've got americium-251 in them. . . . a radioactive element" (15). Then he tells Agnes why he does cocaine only in its crack form: "You need to cook it to get out the . . . stuff that's bad for you" (17).

¹ Letts, Tracy, *Bug* (play). New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2005

Well, what's so odd about that? With thousands of consumer products recently recalled for toxic content, who would be surprised to find a radioactive element in smoke alarms? And as for contaminated street drugs, well, they kill many a user; we just don't hear about these cases unless we're working with the populations affected. Maybe Peter's just better informed than the rest of us.

Peter, who along with Agnes partakes of prodigious quantities of booze, coke, and weed, seems to be suffering from the paranoid delusion that he has been deliberately infected with microscopic bugs, which he claims were planted under his skin by government agents and now are swarming around the room. It seems preposterous that anyone like Peter could be the target of any such experiment. So we guess that he is deluded partly because of the vast quantities of pharmaceuticals he ingests, and possibly also because of some form of post-traumatic stress disorder he may be suffering from since his military days.

Letts is clever in building the suspense. First, the setting — a stifling, mind-numbingly dull, closed-in motel room — is perfect. It's ugly, detached from the outside world, and completely impersonal. Then there's Agnes's sleazy ex-husband, Jerry Goss, who shows up to abuse her and threaten Peter while he's at it. Peter suggests Agnes get a gun to protect herself, not only from Goss but from other nameless threats. "People can do things to you, things you don't even know about. . . . They try to control you. They try to force you to act a certain way. They can drive you crazy, too. . . . I shouldn't talk about it. I don't know if it's safe or not" (21).

Peter's pronouncements and actions grow increasingly bizarre. He turns the motel room into a Raid factory, with flypaper and heavy-duty insecticides in industrial supply. He tells Agnes that the CIA implanted the bugs in his body, and they have gotten out and infested the room. Yet R.C. and a Veterans Affairs doctor who has come to try to persuade Peter to return for more treatment to the hospital where he'd been getting "help," say "there ain't no fucking bugs" (R.C.). "They say [her] sores were 'self-inflicted' (37). Agnes does, eventually, see the bugs, too. Is she also paranoid?

It's hard to be sure. As the two are taking knives to their own skins and scratching themselves bloody, growing increasingly hysterical, we hear helicopters outside. And Peter's accounts of the CIA's methods aren't all that far-fetched, given the unspeakable horrors brought on humans and nonhuman animals over decades by government medical experiments, and the recent widespread covert intervention into people's lives carried out by the U.S. government in the name of "fighting terrorism."

When Peter tells Agnes that there was a secret plan hatched in 1954 by "a consortium of bankers, industrialists, corporate CEOs, and politicians [who] held a series of meetings over three days . . . [to draw up] a plan for maintaining the status quo — " so the "rich get richer, and the poor get poorer" (48), it doesn't seem entirely insane. Maybe, we think, he's right. Maybe this bizarre behavior isn't the result of too many drugs and an increasingly disturbed mind, and maybe

Agnes is not simply caught up in her need for love and companionship enough to turn a blind eye to this madness.

Certainly Letts doesn't want us to be able to decide with certainty that the pair of them are simply nuts. Otherwise he wouldn't have given us the possibly sinister Dr. Sweet; real, proliferating bugs (which become apparent even to the audience in the last scenes); the ever-louder and more ominous-sounding helicopter, and some not-so-implausible intervention scenarios posited by Peter.

At the fiery end of the play, the thoughtful viewer is still not sure what happened: Did the crazies kill themselves because their fantasy horror story became too real, or were they driven to take their own lives to escape a government conspiracy?