The Cautious Traveller's Guide to the Wastelands: Synopsis

This is a middle grade/ YA novel, set near the end of an alternative 19th Century, in which Europe and Asia are divided by the Greater Siberian Wastelands, a landscape of changeable geography and strange flora and fauna. The only means of crossing the Wastelands is by a railway built by the Trans-Siberia Company in an extraordinary feat of daring engineering that has changed the face of both continents, and the fortunes of the Russian and Chinese Empires. But it has also opened up new possibilities for a shadowy underworld to stretch its fingers across the continents, and the train is a hotbed of smuggling and subterfuge.

The novel follows the Trans-Siberia Company's youngest employee, thirteen-year-old Zhang Weiwei. A Rail Rat, she is tasked with the most menial jobs, but this gives her the opportunity to move freely around the train, unrestricted by the class divides which govern it. Weiwei is an orphan, taken in by the morally dubious Miss Yan when she is a very young child, and brought up in the Beijing underworld. Longing for a world beyond that of the Beijing alleys, she joins the Company, but finds that petty crime is a hard habit to shake off, and that the train provides rich pickings for a careful thief. It also, however, hides secrets, and Weiwei finds that danger lies within the train, as well as in the Wastelands outside.

It is a story about journeys and friendship and facing your fears, as well as exploring what monstrosity means and how it can raise questions about the human relationship with the natural world. The novel is inspired by my own travels and my PhD on monsters in classical Chinese anomaly tales.

The first section of the novel recounts the beginning of the journey and Weiwei's encounters with various passengers, as well as her discovery of Elena, who has stowed away on board, and the presence of the mysterious Crow.

Though Weiwei knows the danger, her friendship with Elena develops. Used to only looking out for herself, she is surprised by how much she cares. She shows Elena the secret parts of the train, including a space in the roof of the garden carriage in which a trap-door opens to the outside. If they lodge themselves carefully, they can lie in the roof-space with the sky above them. It is foolhardy but Elena is delighted by it.

They realise that the Crow seems to be targeting Henry Grey, sabotaging his cabin and stealing a vital notebook. Finding a torn page they enlist the help of Suzuki the Cartographer to learn that Grey is seeking the Visitor – a creature who was said, in stories from before the Wastelands, to follow people back to their homes and change them. As they
find out more, they realise that Grey believes the Visitor to be a celestial messenger; proof that there is a Divine Plan to the Wastelands.

Bullied by Ah Pang, Weiwei finds it increasingly difficult to keep Elena a secret, but she is helped by the rich and educated Lan Meihua, who takes an interest in both of them. She is good at keeping secrets, she says, but Weiwei wonders what secrets of her own she is hiding.

Soon, however, threats appear from outside; the mountains in the distance turn out to be huge creatures, reaching up to grab at the storm clouds gathering above them. In the Wastelands storms are unpredictable and can have minds of their own. This storm damages the rails ahead of the train, and they are left with only one choice – to change tracks onto the ghost rails; old tracks that have been long unused. This saves them, for now, but brings challenges of its own, as the tracks are not maintained, and the Cartographer's maps are unreliable. Fear spreads throughout the train.

And then, without warning, the train stops. Weiwei sees Henry Grey running towards the trees, followed by Elena, who by this time is desperate for fresh water. Weiwei confronts Alexei, who has been bribed to sabotage the train by Grey, to let him collect specimens. In the face of Weiwei's fury, Alexei admits he has promised Grey that the train will be stopped for one hour, before the damage is 'fixed'. Weiwei jumps off the train and goes after Elena. She is terrified of being outside in the Wastelands, but also thrilled – she has always wondered what it would be like. She runs towards a forest of trees that bleed red sap and birds that spin webs between them. The sap dyes the webs red, and Weiwei watches in amazement as other birds, and huge insects, are drawn into the webs as if hypnotised by the patterns and colour. She fears that the same thing might happen to Elena, and enters the forest, despite her terror. Once within the trees, she panics as the birds dive at her, their beaks dripping red and winding webs around her. She stumbles into a pool and something grabs her and holds her underwater – it is Elena, keeping her safe until the birds have gone to look for prey elsewhere.

They return to the train just as it is beginning to move. Alexei helps them both jump on. He is overcome with remorse. Grey has already returned, empty-handed and bloodied by the birds' attack. Elena – who had planned to stay in the forest – tries to come to terms with the fact that Weiwei risked her own life to save her. There is an investigation into what happened to the train, but Weiwei keeps silent. However, there is another consequence – as the train moves slowly onwards along the ghost rails, and the Captain and Suzuki desperately try to find a way to return it to the main track, changes begin to happen; a passenger loses the
colour of their eyes; frost patterns appear on the window, despite the heat; wings grow on a woman's back. Weiwei catches a glimpse of something mossy and bark-like, as though it had been put together from leaves and twigs. The Visitor is aboard, and it is moving through the train, changing what it meets.

Returning to the main railway line, the journey continues. But the Visitor is spreading fear and chaos, and Weiwei is targeted by Jinlu, who needs access to Grey's animals to retrieve his smuggled goods. The train's guards try to capture the Visitor but succeed only in making it wilder. Elena is convinced that it means no harm; she feels an affinity with it as a Wastelands creature. Both of them are trying to understand the human world, whilst the human world is scared of them, and unwilling to understand in return. Weiwei agrees to help her capture it safely but they need to outwit the train guards and Henry Grey, who is determined to get his hands on it as a scientific specimen. Matters are made worse when Grey sees Elena (weakened by exertion and the need for water, she can't hide her real form) and he realises that he has another – perhaps even more marvellous – specimen before him.

Two day's journey from Moscow is the Vigil – when the train is held for a day and a night in a quarantined area, surrounded by guards and sprayed with chemicals thought to kill the noxious fumes of the Wastelands. No-one can leave, and no-one can get on. The Vigil is always an anxious time, but this time is much worse – the train workers know that if the Russian authorities learn of the Visitor, they will not allow the train to enter the country; it will be designated as unsafe and will be sealed, with the lives of those on board sacrificed to keep the rest of the Empire safe. The two Company men, Mr Medven and Mr Li, are forced to face their fears and support the Captain in her decision not to allow the train to enter Russia.

As the Vigil goes on, passengers gather in the saloon car to drown out their fears in music and dancing as the food and drink flow. There is a desperation to the celebrations; the fragile normality of society on the train is breaking down. Weiwei and Elena pursue the Visitor through the corridors, trying to trap it without hurting it, as they themselves are pursued by Grey and Jinlu. But Weiwei is worried that Elena is fading too quickly; she needs more fresh water, but they are running out. And as she becomes thirstier, she becomes wilder, losing her more human side. Finally, they track down the Visitor to the saloon car, where it is dancing with the passengers, who seem oblivious to the metamorphoses taking place. It is raining – the first rain for many days. From the outside, it looks as though the train is turning wild; branches and creepers are wrapped around it and the windows are covered in cobwebs and vines. From the inside, it is as though they are trapped in a forest.
There is a showdown between Weiwei and Jinlu, as she exposes his plans and the smuggled jewels. She accuses him of being the Crow but he insists that the Crow has tried to thwart him at every turn. Defending his actions, he says he is working for a greater goal – to give power to the normal people and subvert the workings of the Empires – but the Captain orders him to be locked in his cabin and handed to the police when they arrive in Moscow (even though she realises that it is unlikely that they will ever arrive).

As he is taken away, the Visitor shows itself. Weiwei shouts that it's not evil, it's just trying to give them what they want but the Visitor goes up to Guillaume and plunges its hand into his chest. It takes out his heart and hands it to Sophie, who takes it, unthinkingly, as Guillaume falls. Weiwei whispers that it only gave her what she desperately wanted – Guillaume's heart. The horror of it wakes the passengers from their stupor, and they turn on the creature. But Elena won't let them hurt it; she tries to defend it but they attack her too, realising that she is another Wastelands creature. Weiwei and Alexei help them get away.

Weiwei is heartbroken at the thought of losing her friend but knows there is a way off the train – the skylight in the garden carriage. Alexei distracts the guards whilst they get there. Weiwei and Elena embrace – the first time they have shown how much they mean to each other. 'I will come and find you,' promises Weiwei, and helps them out onto the roof. The rain gives Elena strength, allowing her to blend into the landscape and escape the telescopes and guns of the guards. She and the Visitor disappear back into the borderlands and Weiwei closes the skylight just as the train guards break into the carriage. She feigns a fainting fit and lets the guards – and the rest of the train – believe that they had all been infected by a delusion, brought on by their time spent on the ghost roads.

Now that the Visitor has gone, the train returns to normal, though traces of the changes remain. They are declared safe to continue their journey, which passes quietly. Grey is subdued after losing his precious specimens and has begun to question his beliefs and actions. Alexei is full of remorse over his actions and tries to be a good friend to Weiwei, who is devastated by the loss of Elena. They arrive at Moscow Station at night. In the disorder, Wu Jinlu manages to escape. Unloading Grey's animals onto the platform, Weiwei is attacked by Wu, but to her amazement Lan Meihua appears and fights him off. The Moscow police arrive shortly afterwards and arrest him – caught with the smuggled goods, they have the proof that they need to jail him for his criminal activities. Weiwei watches with satisfaction as he is carted away but is saddened when she sees Sophie escort a coffin off the train. As she passes, Sophie tells Weiwei to live the life she chooses for herself, not one that is chosen for her.
When Weiwei turns back to Lan Meihua, she has disappeared – but there is a black feather on the platform floor. Realising that she must be the Crow, Weiwei runs after her and demands to know the truth. She asks if she's really a widow, if any of the thing she's said on the journey have been true. (Having lost Elena, Weiwei now feels even more alone. She had thought that having the ground back beneath her feet would make things clearer, but now she's suddenly not so sure.) Meihua tells her that yes, all the things she has said were true. She tells her that it is possible to be many things, all at once. She has hunted Wu Jinlu and the Iron Thread all over China; she has used her wealth to try to expose the greed and cruelty of his organisation, and those in authority who have supported it. The Crow has been a convenient disguise, and her actions on the train were all aimed at disrupting Wu's plans. Weiwei asks if she's finished now and Lan Meihua says that she still has work to do; that the Iron Thread stretches further into Europe, and that she would be glad of a willing pupil to travel with her and learn.

Weiwei thinks about it. She looks back and sees the Captain, Alexei, and Suzuki watching from the train, smiling at her. She realises that she's been travelling in a straight line – perhaps it's time to go onto a different track. Somewhere out there, Elena is exploring new worlds; it is time for Weiwei to put aside the *Cautious Traveller's Guide* and do the same. She sticks the black feather in her hair. 'Where are we going first?' she asks.