

Gold Coast Book Lovers

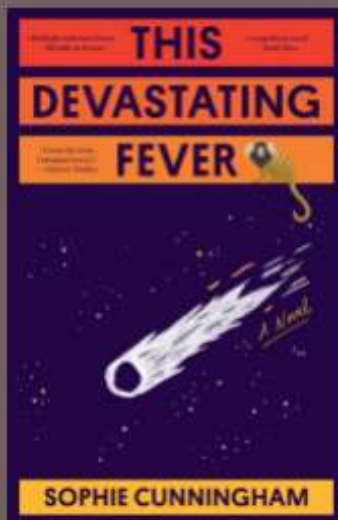
It's all about good books...

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December 2023



In "This Devastating Fever", a modern-day author, Alice Fox, attempts to write a novel about Leonard Woolf. The novel oscillates between the early 20th and 21st centuries as Alice introduces Leonard and Virginia Woolf in 1936 "as book ends for a dress-up party". Alice meanwhile is debating with her publisher Sarah in 2020 about her novel and where is it heading? Fiction? non-fiction, need more about the Bloomsbury set and their sex lives, more about Ceylon and Leonard,? less about Leonard. According to a reviewer from The Guardian: "A large part of the novel is meta fiction, set in the modern day, about Melbourne

writer Alice's 16-year journey writing her own book about Leonard Woolf. But Alice's book – also titled This Devastating Fever – spins out of her control, its subject unwieldy and its author susceptible to researching rabbit-holes, much to the chagrin of her impatient agent. We follow Alice as she visits Sri Lanka to research Leonard Woolf, then to Bloomington, Illinois, to pore over his papers. She spends time walking in the South Downs, and returns to Melbourne to meet periodically with her agent, who is trying to get her writing back on course.

Meanwhile, the ghosts of Leonard and Virginia keep visiting – to either scold her (Alice is focused too much on their sex lives, Virginia says) or pass on more information, as she wrestles with the material she already has."

The book encompasses the sweep of Leonard's adult life, as an administrator in Ceylon, a writer and reviewer himself, a pacifist, a socialist, a publisher and from his courtship of Virginia to her death and beyond. Leonard was Jewish and predicted the rise of the Nazis. In the present, "we meet Alice on the eve of the millennium, and leave her sometime around Melbourne's seventh lockdown where, in a zombie state, she is conducting Zoom meetings from bed while finishing the book."

We do learn a little about the Bloomsbury set, Virginia Woolf, her artist sister Vanessa Bell, E.M. Forster and John Maynard Keynes to name some. Most of them either homosexual or bisexual, mostly in lists about their sex lives and with footnotes. Often, they just get mentioned and not included in the novel.

We do learn about Virginia. She suffered a number of losses at a young age with deaths of various family members, came from a family of brothers, she accused her half-brothers of sexual abuse, loved Toby dearly, had severe Influenza on a number of occasions, suffered from mental illness and suicide attempts until successful in 1941. Together Leonard and Virginia established the Hogarth House publishing her works and others.

After Virginia's death, Leonard moved onto Trekkie Parsons, various societies, letter-writing, gardening, visited Ceylon. He died in 1969.

The novel see-saws between third person 'fictional' narration, 'ghostly' and research-based accounts of the various lives.

The Guardian reviewer concludes:

"Like the book itself, the title can be read on multiple levels: This Devastating Fever might refer to Leonard's words about love, or to the pandemic, or to Alice's own night sweats as she tries to finish her novel." It took Sophie Cunningham 18 years to complete.

And lastly Cunningham says: "[Leonard] was quite a complicated character. From reading his work, I became aware that he was super smart. He was a magistrate and tough on people – and the system was not much fun for the local people living under it – but he was a critic of imperialism. Every generation likes to think it's more woke than the one before, but I don't think it's true. He was raising issues that we are still discussing today."

Our readers had various comments about the novel that included that it was a tedious read at times 'bouncing in and out of being engaged', clunky in delivery, felt like a textbook with use of lists and footnotes, the style of meta fiction and the non-linear structure interesting, and the content overloaded. For some it was a struggle, most of us agreed we 'liked' the book.

Ratings: Hetta 2.5, Suzy, Sandy, Margie 3, Kim, Janet, Dianne 3.5, Jo 4, Di DNR.

We look forward to seeing you again at our next meeting 6:30pm on Tuesday 9th of January 2024 **Room 2.1 in the 2nd floor of the Robina Community Centre**, when we'll talk about ***The Last Daughter*** by Brenda Matthews. Hope to see you there and Happy Reading!

The 2024 Reading List can be found in the sidebar, or below if you're on your mobile device.

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Other Books We Read

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Stone Yard Devotional by Charlotte Wood, 4

Lucy by the Sea by Elizabeth Strout, 4

The Gift of Rain by Tan Twan Eng, 4

How to Loiter in a Turf War by Coco Solid, 4

The Bookbinder of Jericho by Pip Williams, 3.5

Her Sunburnt Country by Deborah Fitzgerald, 3

Yellowface by Rebecca F Kuang, 2

Birnam Wood by Eleanor Catton, 3.5

The Keepsake by Julie Brooks, 3

Night Blue by Angela O'Keeffe, 3.5

The Conversion by Amanda Lohrey, 3

Old God's Time by Sebastian Barry, 4

Moon Tiger by Penelope Lively, 4.5

Prophet Song by Paul Lynch, 3.5