



The Nightingales of Troy: Stories of One Family's Century

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In 1908, Mamie Garrahan faces childbirth aided by her arsenic-eating sister-in-law Kitty, a nun who grows opium poppies, and a doctor who prescribes Bayer Heroin. "In the twentieth century, I believe there are no saints left," Mamie remarks. But her daughters and granddaughter test this notion with far-reaching consequences. Kitty's arsenic reappears sixty years later in the hands of her distraught niece. A schoolgirl's passion for the Beatles and Melville a passion both lonely and funny shapes her life. Each decade is illuminated by endearingly eccentric characters: an anorexic waitress falls for a wealthy college boy in the jazz age...an exuberant young nurse questions science during the Depression...a homely seamstress designs a scandalous dress in the 1950s. The Nightingales of Troy, the first fiction collection by an acclaimed American poet, creates a vividly palpable sense of time and place. Alice Fulton's memorable characters confront the deepest dilemmas with bravery and abiding love."

The Nightingales of Troy: Stories of One Family's Century Details

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Jane Johnson says

Fulton is a magician. Like Louise Erdrich, she has POV chapters that let you see much more than the individual characters but on top of that she spreads these lives and stories over the last century. Each chapter feels like the time period, especially the dialogue. I remember those WTRY jingles, and I love the Hudson River in this book. No one else has brought this area alive like these stories. Wow.

Eva says

My favorite character is this lovely book is a funny, eccentric, willful, and dedicated nurse called Annie (named after Anne of Green Gables). The book begins with her birth and traverses the 20th century, showing her (and other characters) at different life stages. The title story, set in the 1930s, focuses on Annie's nursing, and Nightingales refers to Florence Nightingales (and to the bird in other parts of the book.) Annie's mother, her sisters, and her daughter are strong characters, too. One of them, Charlotte, is very unselfish and giving, but still has a wry sense of humor. The book is full of heart but not sentimental. It's beautifully written, poetic, in the best way. I mean, it's unpretentious, but the language is very moving.

Some of the stories are sad, but some are a riot. For instance, in The Real Eleanor Rigby, Annie (the nurse) meets The Beatles with her teenaged daughter. The portrait of The Beatles is delightful--believable and so funny. Annie is also at the center of the final story. By then, she's lived through most of the century and is 90-some years old. She is a memorable character, and details of the various decades seem right. The old medical techniques are fascinating.

I especially appreciate the pacing of the book. Some stories are tragic, but some are hilarious, and the author wisely follows the very sad chapters with something lighter. There are none of the cheesy effects (unlikely coincidences, contrived endings) that ruin much good fiction for me. Every chapter in this book of connected stories is a winner.

Jinny says

This book will haunt me for a long time because it's about the inevitable, and will delight for a long time with its humor and celebration of people and their will to live. It is "hardy but not comely," as Mamie Garrahan says of herself; it is not pretty, but it's striking and beautiful. As Mamie says, "Happiness is nothing but God's presence in the silence of the nerves." And as Father Jolley observes, "All education which does not soften the heart is wasted."

Fulton shows her characters' natures as by turns obvious and ordinary, and hidden and complex; trapped by circumstances or personality or habit, and inexplicably growing and changing. The language is packed-tight like poetry (no surprise that Fulton is a poet)...quirky and colloquial...we can hear the Garrahan women's inner thoughts about themselves and others, expressed in words we might use in our own minds -- "just us chickens." This made the range of characters, from the "get cracking" Mamie to the worn down Charlotte (..."sleep was seductive as drug..It had an undertow...") to the practical-minded Annie -- easy to identify with. Plain, cold Troy, New York was depicted together with an opium-growing nun and a socialite

interested in Japanese ways, including a "shadow table" for her dead daughter.

The reader comes to see the book as a kind of shadow table for all of the main characters: welcoming and invoking their best selves, at the same time those selves are not yet fully present. But they are on the way; they are traveling, as we learn in the Latin phrase used in "Happy Dust:" Sator Arepo Tenet Opera Rotas: "...I creep toward the sower and holder of the workings and the wheels," and in the nursing school motto Annie repeats to herself: Esse Quam Videri ..."To be rather than to seem."

This is one of those books that makes a reader want to surmount her own obstacles and see what she can do.

Carole says

connected stories that were beautifully written.

Karen says

BookBrowse interview with Alice Fulton.

"The world presented here is a dark one, punctuated as it is with madness, a drowning, hospitalization, unfulfilled desires, and an unhappy marriage, but realism is never used for the sake of preventing nostalgia, and never overwhelms. Moments of genuine humor are juxtaposed with seriousness. Though you may find yourself wishing the characters would emerge unscarred, happiness is not found in the avoidance of pain. It's found, wisely, in the midst of it—through the loyalty of sisterhood and through the honoring of the past as an ever-present force. Alice Fulton's debut would appeal to any reader fascinated by the evolution of women's roles throughout the past, or to those who enjoy stories about love in its many guises. The stories succeed beautifully in drawing the world inhabited by these "Nightingales of Troy", who, like Florence Nightingale, minister to those around them."

-Karen Rigby (for BookBrowse.com)

Rae says

"That night, Ruth lay awake, obsessing. They were entering the last day of the century, and she had no plan. You must change your life!..."

Ruth sometimes composed imaginary perfumes to put herself to sleep. Now she thought of a fragrance that smelled only of water, a perfume that had forgotten its flowers. Lethe. That's what she'd name it." (p. 246-247, "L'Air du Temps")

I should say I'm kind of uninterested in family epics in general - there always seems to be something strange about the fact that the reader (usually) gets to develop such a clearer sense of huge arcs of family patterns than anyone in the family themselves. But I have loved Alice's poems ever since undergrad, each book more than the last, and a woman at Eliot Bay Books recommended this to me with such passion over the summer (she literally added the book to my pile when she saw what else I had) that I gave in.

What's most excellent about this book is the fact that each character gets her own space. This alone seems to me brilliant. And then there is the fact that something of Gertrude Stein seems present even though there's nothing direct I can point to to make that comparison - even better. The stories also seemed to me to work as essays insomuch as they felt subtly argumentative, like the voice behind them was well aware of what it was demonstrating about the nature of time, and what remains of past time.

Kate says

Alice Fulton is brilliant, a find, one of the most exciting contemporary writers I've read, right up there with Anthony Doerr, Lorrie Moore, and Annie Proulx. Fulton's character development is enviable, and the weaving of characters and themes through these interrelated stories is knockout good. She knows story. Example: her subtle allusion to Bartleby in "Not too Much to Ask," If you don't know Melville's story you'll miss just how effective this is. Even if you don't get the allusions (I doubt I got them all), there's sooooo-much to like. This book explores time, love, loneliness, cruelty, heartbreak, madness, drowning, suicide -- yet it's not depressing. Yes, I cried, but Fulton knows when to give the reader a reason to laugh. And you will laugh! I loved this book. I didn't want it to end. I wanted to stay with the characters, especially Annie.

Michelle Wilson says

The thing that I have most enjoyed is how these interlocking stories give a more intimate portrait of this family than a novel would. The writing is also tremendous.

Georgene says

I purchased this book because I often visit Troy, NY, where my daughter lives. I was expecting more local details, and there is a map of Troy included with the book that shows buildings from the story that still stand. The book is a collection of short stories featuring the women in the Garrahan family and each stand-alone story takes place in a different decade in and around Troy, beginning in 1908 and ending in 1999. The characters truly stand out and are fully realized in the shortness of the chapters. The writing is tight and

descriptive and poetic, but a little weird. And there are weird things about the stories that kind of bothered me. I wasn't sure why some of the weirdness was there.

Susan says

To get the full force of this book, read it slowly, read it aloud to yourself or to someone else. There's great pain here, but this book also celebrates the beautiful, funny, weirdness of life.

April says

I thought this book was rather strange. I also found it difficult to follow the family line as the book progressed and kept turning back to figure out who the next story was about. Although when the story got to Annie, the nurse, it seemed that the stories unfolded more clearly. I didn't really care for some of the stories, but there were a few that tickled me!! The story about the girl who had problems and escaped from the mental institution was a favorite - especially when she put her sister's dress on over her scrubs - this got me laughing! I also liked the story about the little girl who was obsessed with Herman Melville and the Beatles. She reminded me of myself when I was a girl. Once I finished the book, my initial thoughts were trying to figure out what the point of the book as a whole is. I'm thinking that it's just a family of women who defied societal norms in their day. Or perhaps the message readers are to swallow is that oddities stay within families, even years later? My overall opinion is that the book is unique in itself and definitely worth reading, at least for the few stories in it that one won't be able to forget and also for the comical aspect. I enjoyed the titles of the stories and the puzzles of trying to figure out the symbolism within each one. I finished this book in about three days, which should have been one. I feel that this book is meant to be read in one sitting - perhaps then there wouldn't have been any confusion as to who was who in the stories :)

Amanda Miller says

I highly recommend these connected stories! An excellent read with really beautiful writing!

Zed says

This is a new form of fiction - the connected short story collection. The first book I read using this structure was Andrea Barrett's "Servants Of The Map", which was excellent. Fulton has stretched the form a little further by setting each of ten stories in a successive decade of the 1900's. There are a few common characters but the stories all involve members of a single Irish-American family, the Garrahans, living in the upper Hudson Valley, especially the city of Troy and environs. The men in the family all appear to be outsiders, whose roles could safely be assigned to character actors, but the women - ah, the women... The women of this family would have to be played by the most accomplished actresses of their times, actors capable of complex emotional portrayals, interspersed with knock-em-dead comedic interludes.

Over four generations and nearly a hundred years the Garrahan women could populate a full season of Shakespeare: comedies, tragedies, and the histories. There is madness, suicide, jilted lovers, heroism, giddy schoolgirls, and opium-peddling nuns. (OK, so Shakespeare missed out on the opium-peddling nuns, but he

got most everything else.) This is not one of those books that you cannot put down - you have to put it down to get out your handkerchief to wipe away tears, either from weeping or laughter.

One more thing: Alice Fulton's day job is major American poet, and the skills she picked up in that trade show to good effect. My friend put it this way, "Fulton writes writing but her characters talk talking." The authorial sentences are beautifully crafted, but her dialog is absolutely faithful to the time and place of the speaker. This is a very good book.

Amy says

Alice Fulton had me just twelve pages into her collection, when Mamie, a rural housewife in 1908 who is pregnant with her fifth child, begins to feel labor pains. "I stopped scrubbing the floor," she says, "and began scouring buckets and bowls. I pumped water for boiling and placed torn strips of cloth in the oven to bake clean. A woman in labor should have plenty fixed for others to eat, yet I was caught short. I could only put a big plate of bread and butter on the table." She ties towels to the bedposts to pull against, and later in the day, she employs them with vigor, and baby Anne is born.

This collection of linked short stories chronicles the women of a family in upstate New York as they think their private thoughts while performing endless female labor, which Fulton beautifully renders. Mamie's mother Peg puts it this way: "Thank the Lord for faces to cover what you felt." To a woman, they seem at an acute angle to their own times, even as they outwardly represent the lifestyles of each of the decades of the twentieth century. A surprising proportion of them have accidental experiences with drugs, which I take to be Fulton's way of underscoring her characters' interior differences and freedoms.

I liked the earlier stories best, because here Fulton's dialogue shines. Listen to Jarvis, a widower, propose to Peg in her sixty-fifth year: "Peg, we understand each other. You're a bold woman, and I like that. As for myself, I don't spit or wipe my mouth on my sleeve." It would be an honor and a pleasure—" Peg interrupts him: "Not to come before you in your speech, but can I fetch you a cup of cold milk? I'm sure that's what you're after asking." Jarvis continues: "Like I said, you are a woman full of sport, and I get a fit on my heart when I think of you." Peg accepts, quite begrudgingly. I bet Fulton would appreciate novelist David Mitchell's phrase "Bygonese," a historical dialect which is "inaccurate but plausible."

Fulton's later stories were less resonant with me, perhaps because the nearness of the decades made her characters' strangeness, the subtle uncanniness, stand out less. But even in those pages, I relished her descriptions of the most everyday minutiae (Fulton is a poet by trade). Here's a cat: "Bartleby crouched on top of the bookcase, his eyes open yet focused inward, as if he had swallowed a riveting puzzle." Or this one, the physical gone metaphysical: "Ruth stopped coloring her hair, and her part turned silver, as if her head were unzipping."

I will say that I'm not generally a fan of short stories, and "linked" short stories do not bridge the difference between stories and the novel. I would have fallen for the book had Fulton chosen to follow any of her women through her life. But if you like short stories, this collection will gratify.

Laura says

This novel is written in a great way--from many different points of view, many different narrators. It follows the lives of a family over a generation. The chapters are 'mini stories' narrated by different characters in the story. It gives a great view of relationships from different perspectives.

Amy says

Alice Fulton steps from poet to short story collection with grace and beauty. *The Nightingales of Troy* is deftly constructed and introduced the reader to several generations of women from one family living in Troy NY from 1909-1999. Moving from laughter to tears, often in the same story, Fulton depicts fully drawn characters that the reader will not soon forget.

Shawn Adams says

First time I read this was a year ago, and I just read it again. These stories remind me of Flannery O'Connor. All of them are wicked good. Fulton's the best short fiction writer I've read in years- and I read a lot of stories.

Elizabeth says

A quick read. Quirky characters. Fulton has a gift for creating distinctive voices and compelling the stories. She knit doesn't things up too tightly across stories, but leaves it to the reader to make those connections.

I don't have many complaints about the writing - except that in the early stories - maybe the first 1/3 of the book, there would be a line here or there that strained the narrative. The wording would be a little too eccentric and I wasn't sure whether it was the character who had a strange grasp on language or thought or reality (and they certainly did at times) or whether it was the writer just liking a particular line and not wanting to cut it. But anyway, the line would stick out as not fitting completely into the world of the character.

I thought it was interesting that the last 1/4 of the book shifts into third person. And wonder why she made that choice. To show how the voices had become diluted through the centuries - and how the eccentricity became diluted?

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

There were a lot of things I liked about these stories, and I wish I had written a review right after I finished them. But I didn't, so a few quotes I copied from the book will have to suffice.

"Never a Dull Moment...What did people have against dull moments, anyway? The best things in life were dull."

"All education which does not soften the heart is wasted."

"Silence is so steadfast, you know. It is so ample, after all."

Tara says

I've only read half this book so far, but I have to say that these are some of the most brilliant, well-crafted, original, and interesting stories I've read in a loooong time. Highly recommended!
