

What We're Reading - 16 April 2021

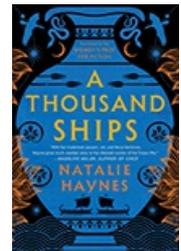
Lucy Nathan

Opinion - Books Friday, 16th April 2021

The BookBrunch team reveals what's on their bedside tables

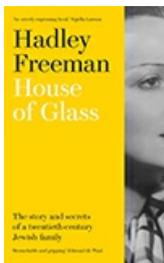
Jo Henry

I'm listening to Natalie Haynes read her book *A Thousand Ships* (Pan Macmillan), the aftermath of the Trojan war seen through the eyes of the women. This is a topic that's been (not always successfully) addressed by others, but it's fascinating to be reminded just how many women there are in the story, and not all with walk-on parts. With the muse, Calliope, urging the poet on, we start with Creusa, daughter of Priam and the first wife of Aeneas, in a vivid sequence as she fails to escape the flames of Troy. The captured Trojan women, waiting on the beach to discover their fate, act as a chorus, while Penelope regularly provides her thoughts on the inordinate amount of time her husband is taking to return to her - including his seven-year dalliance with the nymph Calypso. I'm now on the very bloody section where Clytemnestra welcomes home her husband Agamemnon; it's difficult to see how this interpretation can be bettered.



Nicholas Clee

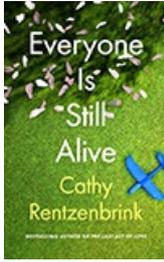
Readers of Hadley Freeman's journalism in the Guardian may not need much persuading to pick up her family history *House of Glass* (4th Estate): she's such an engaging writer. Here, she proves herself to be just as accomplished at long form narrative, and at sympathetic portraits of a varied cast characters. Among them - two generations up from the author - are her grandmother Sala, who dreamed of an elegant life in Paris but became a disappointed housewife in suburban America; the pugnacious, reckless, resourceful Alex, a successful couturier and later gallery owner; and mild-mannered, conformist Jacques, whose fate is terrible. Freeman tackles the most demanding of themes - the depths of inhumanity, the nature of identity, the compromises of survival - with great insight and integrity.



Lucy Nathan

My kindle tells me I am 22% into *My Dear, I Wanted to Tell You* by Louisa Young (The Borough Press). So far it is excellent - it has mostly followed the story of Riley Purefoy, lifted from his working-class roots by a local artist and bohemian family, who signs up to fight in the First World War after an unsettling incident with an art student. What I like most about it is how vivid and immediate the writing is - it doesn't need to describe the trenches in sickening detail to convey their horrors. So far I'm not especially invested in the love story, but that isn't why I'm reading it - apparently about halfway through, the book gets specific about the development of plastic surgery to restore soldiers' features during the war, and it sounds fascinating - although not promising for Riley's so-far-described-as-handsome face.





David Roche

I was delighted to be lucky enough to blag a proof of Cathy Rentzenbrink's new book and first novel *Everyone is Still Alive* (Phoenix) which is published in July. I have been a big fan of Cathy's talent since her Waterstones days and it has been such a pleasure to see her career develop, first at Quick Reads and then as a writer and author. This is her first novel, and is a dose of reality in high life suburbia, following four couples who live in and around Magnolia Lane, a sought-after residential quarter for aspirational social benchmarkers who have climbing ambitions. The ups and downs and interactions are closely observed and smothered with dry humour; hideously recognisable weaknesses are exposed and all the while though intentions are generally good even if not particularly well placed. The

book is kind and real, and it's funny and touching. I raced through it and immediately handed it to my wife who ripped through it in half the time, my sister is now devouring it - all in the space of less than a week. This book will do well and deserves to, as does Cathy who writes with heart as well as head, and puts back much of her time and effort to help writers at the beginning of their careers.

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