The strange case of the alchemist’s daughter (Jun 2017)

Author: Goss, Theodora

Adult Fiction 🌟

Series: Extraordinary adventures of the Athena Club, 1

Description: Alone and penniless, Mary Jekyll hunts for her father’s killer, a former friend named Edward Hyde, along with help from Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson resulting in the discovery of a secret society of immoral and power-crazed scientists.

Book Appeal Terms: Definition of Appeal Terms

Genre: Adaptations; Adult books for young adults; Historical fantasy

Themes: Found footage; Playing God

Character: Likeable; Strong female

Storyline: Intricately plotted; Unconventional

Pace: Fast-paced

Tone: Amusing

Writing Style: Engaging; Witty

Persistent link to this record (Permalink):

Booklist:

Five young women in Victorian London solve a serial-murder case, uncover a secret scientific society, and form a new family in Goss’ charming but overstuffed genre hybrid. The novel twist? They are daughters of classic literature’s mad scientists as well as products of their unorthodox experiments. After her parents’ deaths, Mary Jekyll discovers a secret fund “for the care and keeping of Hyde,” but her father’s criminal assistant is supposedly dead. With the help of Sherlock Holmes, she follows the money to a home for fallen women, where she finds Hyde’s daughter, Diana. Mary’s search for Hyde leads her next to other daughters—Beatrice Rappaccini, Catherine Moreau, and Justine Frankenstein—and the wicked Société des Alchimistes. An awkward narrative device wherein the ladies interrupt the story with comments from a future vantage point slows down an already meandering tale, which is too invested in retelling the characters’ origins instead of developing the more interesting conspiracy tying them together. Still, the clever premise and referential humor are a pleasure, especially for fans of Victorian detective stories, classic sf and horror literature, and feminist remakes. — Hutley, Krista (Reviewed 5/15/2017) (Booklist, vol 113, number 18, p28)

Publishers Weekly:

*/" Starred Review */ World Fantasy Award—winner Goss’s debut novel, richly reworking a short story (published in Strange Horizons in 2010) with influences as diverse as The Castle of Otranto and Mystery Science Theater 3000, brings her gothic-inflected fantasies roaring into the steampunk era. The main narrative is a standout pastiche of late Victorian mystery fiction, set in an alternate 1880s London and featuring Sherlock Holmes and a quintet of remarkable women: Diana Hyde, Beatrice Rappaccini, Catherine Moreau, Justine Frankenstein, and Mary Jekyll. Mary is penniless and hoping to remedy that by claiming the bounty on the fugitive Edward Hyde. She partners with Holmes to find him—though Holmes is somewhat distracted by a killer who’s targeting Whitechapel prostitutes—and in the process discovers the other “monstrous” daughters of infamous scientists. Goss easily surmounts the challenge of making such a male-defined premise belong to the women as shapers of their own destinies. A peppering of the daughters’ wry comments, first presented as brief marginalia, swiftly blossoms into dialogues and alternative takes on the tale—in some cases nearly 200 pages before the commenter herself enters the plot.
This is a tour de force of reclaiming the narrative, executed with impressive wit and insight. (June) --Staff (Reviewed 04/17/2017) (Publishers Weekly, vol 264, issue 16, p)

Library Journal:

After her mother’s death, Mary Jekyll is penniless. Her father had died not long before, and in searching through her mother’s few papers, Mary finds a reference to payments to a person named “Hyde.” Mary remembers her father’s disturbing associate, Edward Hyde, who disappeared after murdering a man. If she can collect the reward for information about Hyde’s whereabouts, she may be able to stay afloat. But the slim clue leads not to Edward, but to his illegitimate daughter Diana, and Mary turns to renowned detective Sherlock Holmes for help. Not only do Arthur Conan Doyle and Robert Louis Stevenson’s characters get an outing, but we dip into Frankenstein, The Island of Doctor Moreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s story "Rappaccini’s Daughter" for a cast of women who join Mary’s adventure and constantly interrupt the story more in the manner of a peanut gallery than a Greek chorus. VERDICT World Fantasy Award winner Goss (In the Forest of Forgetting) takes us on a delightful romp through Victorian gothic literature, with a decidedly feminist slant.—MM --Megan M. McArdle (Reviewed 05/15/2017) (Library Journal, vol 142, issue 9, p66)

Kirkus:

The daughters of literature’s most infamous scientists band together in Goss’ (Red as Blood and White as Bone, 2016, etc.) Gothic adventure story. Goss, who has been nominated for many awards, including the Nebula, and has won the World Fantasy and Rhysling awards, collects characters from titans of her genre and does a little reanimation of her own. When Mary Jekyll, daughter of Dr. Henry Jekyll, finds herself orphaned and penniless, she decides to pursue a police reward for information leading to the capture of her father’s former assistant, the murderer Edward Hyde. With the help of none other than Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, Mary follows the trail and soon finds herself the ringleader of a troupe of young women who have been cruelly experimented on by the likes of the doctors Rappaccini, Moreau, and Frankenstein. Giving these young ladies much-needed agency is such a ripe premise for a novel that it’s frustrating to see them suffocate under Goss’ decision to have them recount their stories of origin. Between an overreliance on the referenced novels, a distracting literary device in which characters comment on each other’s stories, and allusions to a wider mystery, there is no room for the characters to have the independent characterizations they so richly deserve. One hopes for further installments if only to give them room to breathe. Despite a potential-laden premise that stands out from the many character-mashup stories on the market, this collection of parts fails to come alive. (Kirkus Reviews, April 15, 2017)
Theodora Goss

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About this Person

Born: Hungary  
Nationality: American  
Occupation: College teacher  
Updated: July 6, 2018

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born in Hungary; immigrated to the United States as a child; married Kendrick Goss (a scientist); children: Ophelia.  
Education: University of Virginia, B.A.; Harvard Law School, J.D.; Boston University, M.A., Ph.D., 2011.  
Addresses: Home: Boston, MA. Office: Boston University, CAS Writing Program, 100 Bay State Rd., 3rd Fl., Boston, MA 02215.

CAREER:

Writer. Boston University, Boston, MA, instructor. Also worked briefly as a corporate attorney in New York, NY.

AWARDS:

Nebula Award finalist, Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, for the short story "Pip and the Fairies."  

WORKS:

WRITINGS:

- (Author of introduction) Mike Allen, Disturbing Muses (poems), Wildside Press (Rockville, MD), 2005.  
- In the Forest of Forgetting (short stories), Prime Books (Holicong, PA), 2006.  
- (Editor, with Delia Sherman) Interdictions: An Anthology of Interstitial Writing, Interstitial Arts Foundation (Boston, MA), 2007.  

Also author of the chapbook The Rose in Twelve Petals and Other Stories. Contributor of short stories to books, including The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, The Year's Best Fantasy, The Year's Best
Sidelights

Hailed as a rising star of the "New Weird" genre of fantasy fiction, Theodora Goss has published numerous critically acclaimed short stories, a short story collection, and two novels. She is also the coeditor of *Interfictions: An Anthology of Interstitial Writing*.

The book contains examples of fiction that, according to the editors, does not fit neatly within traditional categories. The works in this collection, by such writers as Mikal Trimm, Karen Jordan Allen, and Veronica Schanoes, show influences from science fiction, fairy tale and fantasy, and magic realism, but also transcend those labels. "*Interfictions* is a phenomenal collection," wrote Marie Mundaca in the *Hipster Book Club*. "The stories are as slippery as eels, and are engrossing and provocative."

Goss's first collection, *In the Forest of Forgetting*, was welcomed as an elegantly imagined exploration of motifs from fairy tales and folk legends. Cheryl Morgan, reviewing the book in *Emerald City*, praised Goss's "elegant but creepy prose that often puts a chill up the spine at the same time as you are admiring the author's eloquence."

The collection begins with "The Rose in Twelve Petals," a retelling of the Sleeping Beauty story that was originally published as the title story in a chapbook. As described by *SciFi.com* contributor John Clute, the piece is "a superb example" of a twice-told tale. "It does everything a great Twice-Told must do, or any great story of our time," he observed. "It takes every mode of telling its feeds from as a literal description of the case: for the only way to narrate the fissures is to believe what you say."

In an *SF Site* review of the chapbook, Charlene Brusso deemed "The Rose in Twelve Petals" a "chilly, expertly crafted blossom of a story."

Critics also cited "The Rapid Advance of Sorrow," "Professor Berkowitz Stands on the Threshold," and "Miss Emily Gray" as among *In the Forest of Forgetting*’s more memorable pieces. *Booklist* contributor Ray Olson deemed the latter story an instant "classic." Observing that Goss's stories "celebrate a free-spirited disdain for social conventions but ... more often than not end on a bittersweet, and sometimes even a sombre, note," *Strange Horizons* website writer Abigail Nussbaum concluded that the "cumulative effect of her stories is the heartfelt reminder that we can do as we like so long as we remember that no one ever promised us a happy ending. Taken as a whole, perhaps the moral of *In the Forest of Forgetting* is a very simple one—be careful what you wish for."

Goss explained in an interview in *Science Fiction Writers of Earth* that she has been drawn to fantasy literature since early childhood. She hated being made to read realistic fiction in school. "I couldn't imagine a life so ... boring [and] ugly," she said. "I still remember ... falling asleep to the sound of a train travelling through Europe and waking up in small towns, knowing that we had arrived in yet another country. I remember relatives who talked about having seen tanks rolling down the streets of Budapest, in 1956. I remember seeing Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*, crumbling on the walls of a church in Milan. None of these things appeared in 'realistic' fiction, and yet they were real. "Fantasy," she added, "was about adventure, and peril, and the search for beauty. That made sense to me."

In her novel *The Strange Case of the Alchemist’s Daughter*, Goss presents a tale set in an alternate Victorian London. The story features the daughters of literary monster-makers, Diana Hyde, Beatrice Rappacini, Catherine Moreau, Justine Frankenstein, and Mary Jekyll. Sherlock Holmes also makes an appearance. All of the women are struggling to make ends meet, so Catherine writes a novel, and
Mary attempts to find the fugitive Edward Hyde to collect the hefty bounty that's been placed on his head. Mary teams up with Sherlock Holmes, but he is more interested in the serial killer who has been preying on the prostitutes in Whitechapel. Notably, the story has a unique structure, and Goss explained to a Wired Online interviewer: "The narrative itself is actually written by [the character] Catherine, who's a writer. She's writing this book to make money, but the other girls are in the room with her--or they come and go--as she's writing this book, and they look over her shoulder and they comment on it."

The Strange Case of the Alchemist's Daughter was born out of Goss's Ph.D. dissertation, a lengthy study on the mad scientists and monsters that appear in Victorian literature. As Goss told the Wired Online interviewer, "a lot of these mad scientists, somewhere along their trajectory, create female monsters ... And they don't get to say a whole lot, usually. Sometimes we get little bits and pieces of their stories, but we don't get much." Praising Goss's effort to amend this on the NPR Website, Jason Heller asserted: "For all its intellectual trickiness, 'Strange Case' is a swiftly paced, immaculately plotted mystery full of winning characters." Heller went on to praise the novel's "elaborate web of reality, fantasy, science fact, science fiction, literary criticism, and competing voices. At its heart, Strange Case is a lively, late-Victorian adventure that celebrates, overhauls, and pokes gentle fun at the era's weird-fiction tradition. But it's also a sparkling, insightful conversation with the canon from which it sprang."

Andrew Liptak, writing on the Verge website, was also impressed, and he commented: "What makes Goss' novel exceptional is how it goes beyond the mere fascination of seeing Frankenstein spend a day with Edward Hyde. She questions the very motivations that links these characters together. Goss upends fantasy tropes to bring to life characters who would have been ignored in the period works that inspired them, and the result is a fantastic, gripping read that feels true to the spirit of the original works, but updated with a modern spin for the 21st century reader."

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

- Booklist, June 1, 2006, Ray Olson, review of In the Forest of Forgetting, p. 50.
- Library Journal, July 1, 2006, Jackie Cassada, review of In the Forest of Forgetting, p. 70.
- Publishers Weekly, June 12, 2006, review of In the Forest of Forgetting, p. 36; April 17, 2017, review of The Strange Case of the Alchemist's Daughter.

ONLINE

• Strange Horizons, http://www.strangehorizons.com/ (September 21, 2006), Abigail Nussbaum, review of In the Forest of Forgetting.
• Verge, https://www.theverge.com/ (September 13, 2017), Andrew Liptak, review of The Strange Case of the Alchemist's Daughter.
• Wired Online, https://www.wired.com/ (September 13, 2017), author interview.*

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13 General Book Club Questions
For Any Kind Of Discussion

By SADIE TROMBETTA

Updated:
Sep 11, 2019

1. "What was your initial reaction to the book? Did it hook you immediately, or take some time to get into?"

"Begin with a book club question that asks about everyone's first impression of the book,"

Sadie Trombetta recommends. Shutterstock

Before diving into the heavier plot points or contesting the ending, begin with a book club question that asks about everyone's first impression of the book. It will give you a jumping off point to discuss what about the selection kept you turning the pages, and what made it difficult to get through, all information that will help you pick an even better book next time around.

2. "Do you think the story was plot-based or character driven?"

Another question that will get people thinking about the book as a whole, discussing whether the book is all about the characters or all about the plot will help frame the remainder of your conversation.

From here, you can either dive into a deeper discussion of character flaws or move on to plot holes, depending on where your group lands.

3. "What was your favorite quote/passage?"

One of my favorite part of discussing books is finding out which parts of the book stuck out to other people, especially in terms of quotations. Asking each member in your club to read their favorite part out loud will not only give you a chance to hear the story again, but it also gives you an opportunity to
learn more about the members of your book club, and perhaps interpret a scene from the book in a whole new way.

4. "What made the setting unique or important? Could the story have taken place anywhere?"

In many books, the setting is a significant part of the story, even acting as a character itself. Use this question to explore what made the setting of your reading selection so important, and how it affected the events of the story.

5. "Did you pick out any themes throughout the book?"

I know what you're thinking, this sounds too much like an essay question from your high school literature class, but in reality, it's the perfect open-ended question than can generate some great conversation.

6. Any "If/then" Questions

"Use the "If... then..." model when it comes to formulating book club questions," according to Trombetta. Shutterstock

Use the "If... then..." model when it comes to formulating book club questions, like "If the protagonist chose her other love interest, how might the book have been different?" or "If So-and-So had lived, do you think the ending would have changed?" Your options are limitless.
7. "How credible/believable did you find the narrator to be? Did you feel like you got the 'true' story?"

Whenever you discuss a story from a book, it's important to consider who told that story. Is it a narrator who you can trust and rely on, or do they have ulterior motives in the way they tell it? **Unreliable narrators** are among the most intriguing characters to discuss, so use this question as a starting point to really explore them.

8. "How did the characters change throughout the story? How did your opinion of them change?"

The best kind of stories feature dynamic characters who change throughout the book. Ask your group about which characters from your reading selection grew and changed throughout the book, and who stayed the same. Follow up by trying to figure out what changes you liked, which you didn't, and which changes you were left waiting for, holding your breath.

9. "How did the structure of the book affect the story?"

Another question like the ones you used to dread in English class, talking about the actual structure of a book — the timeline, the viewpoints, the syntax — can be more revealing than you think.

10. "Which character did you relate to the most, and what was it about them that you connected with?"

A fun question that is sure to get a diverse list of answers, this is a good way to not only dive into your reading selection more, but an opportunity to learn about the members of your club.
11. "How did you feel about the ending? What did you like, what did you not like, and what do you wish had been different?"

"A simple opinion-based question, asking how people feel about the ending is a great way to start healthy debates within your book club," writes Trombetta. Shutterstock

A simple opinion-based question, asking how people feel about the ending is a great way to start healthy debates within your book club. Some people will like the ending and be satisfied by the way things wrapped up, but inevitably, someone will pipe up and share their displeasure. Buckle up, because that's when the good discussion really gets going.

12. "Did the book change your opinion or perspective about anything? Do you feel different now than you did before you read it?"

As corny as it may sound, books do have the power to change lives and influence people. Have a discussion with your book club about the ways your reading selection has changed each of you. You might be surprised to hear how inspired, empowered, enraged, or even educated your friends are from a single reading experience.

13. "If the book were being adapted into a movie, who would you want to see play what parts?"

A popular question to end the discussion off with, talking about possible book-to-movie adaptations is always a fun game of make-believe. By discussing possible casting choices for a movie adaption, you can learn how others saw the characters in their minds versus how you created them in your own. It's a great question that is sure to turn into a lively debate.