



Bitter Fruits

Alice Clark-Platts

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Detective Inspector Erica Martin's first case in the university city of Durham is Emily Brabents, a first-year student, who is found dead in the river.

DI Martin visits Joyce College, a cradle for the country's future elite, and finds a close-knit community full of secrets, jealousy and obsession.

Her search reveals a vicious online trolling culture but could Emily, from the privileged and popular crowd, have been a victim? Should the sudden confession to the murder by the student president be believed?

And just who is the mysterious Daniel Shepherd whose name keeps appearing in the investigation...?

Bitter Fruits Details

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Author : Alice Clark-Platts

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Gill Chedgey says

Bitter Fruits - Alice Clark Platts

I love debut novels. They are such a lottery. They can be dire and finishing them can feel like wading through treacle. They can be okay and you sense some promise and defer ultimate judgement until the next one. Or they can completely blow you away.

I couldn't put this book down and I mean that literally. Everything was put on hold until I finished it.

I hesitate to use the word brilliant because it is overused and my response is subjective but for me this wasn't far short.

It's a deceptive book and more substantial than it seems at first. And yet curiously there is a danger that this substance could be overlooked as the reader focuses purely on the crime aspect because it is so well done the attention doesn't stray.

The plot is tight, well constructed with a veritable shoal of red herrings to lure the reader into believing they have solved this crime. The characters are believable. There is no holding back when highlighting some of today's contemporary issues; internet bullying so endemic nowadays, the morality of the media, or their lack of it, the dynamics of a police force pressured into delivering results unreasonably quickly to satisfy the bureaucrats and social commentators as if catching a murderer is so easy. And throughout the book how hard it is to be a young person in today's world. I could go on the book has such a lot to offer.

There were imperfections; the story uses a dual narrative technique and there were a couple of inconsistencies, for example a character developed in the first narrative was suddenly mentioned in the second with no exposition. Some of the descriptive passages were so typical of a debut novel, that desire to demonstrate all at once the writer's abilities. But I'm nit picking and this book doesn't deserve it.

I'm very excited by this writer and I do hope there are more tales of this calibre to issue forth from her pen. Alice Clark-Platts? I am a fan.

Liz Barnsley says

Bitter Fruits was a really beautifully written novel, haunting, atmospheric, very lyrical in places and a heady mix of police procedural and psychological thriller - one woven into the other in an intelligent and really engaging style that makes this a real page turner.

Emily is found dead, and Martin, newly arrived to the area is put on the case. As she investigates, dark secrets begin to emerge about the college Emily attended in Durham, indeed dark secrets are surfacing all round...

It is actually quite difficult to describe how well this works, how perfectly pitched it is both in tone and flow - Martin's investigation, diary entries from a boy called Daniel who charts his ongoing friendship with Emily - both leading one into the other and back again to paint a full picture. There are some wonderfully deep characters here as well - Emily is an enigma, Daniel has such a distinct and intriguing narrative voice, then you have Martin determined to put it all together and get justice for the victim.

Shades of "The Secret History" here in a good way- dare I say though in some ways much better because the author resists the urge to ramble on but still has an absolutely spot on sense when it comes to using language

to invoke emotional response. Switching between beautiful and practical in the feel of it, this novel worked for me on every level.

Overall then really really good. I'm a fan. A huge fan and this comes highly recommended from me.

Happy Reading Folks!

Laura says

Thanks to Netgalley and the publishers for providing me with an ARC in return for an honest review

This is a really awkward review to write and one that I've had to think carefully about, mainly because the ARC I received was in dire need of editing for style and language (and I don't mean proofreading - there weren't typos, it was just badly written). So how should I review it? Should I just review the copy I was given, or should I try and see through the bad writing and assume that that will be ironed out in the published copy? The edits required are (I think) substantial, and it would essentially need re-drafting. To make writing a review even more difficult, there is a bold-lettered statement at the beginning of all ARCs stating that I can't quote the book because it's subject to change (which is absolutely fair enough). I'll struggle to accurately illustrate why I didn't like this book without using direct quotes, but here goes...

The premise of this book was great. The corpse of Emily Brabents, a first-year student at Durham University, is found floating in a weir on a summer morning in Durham. It soon becomes apparent that the death wasn't accidental and that she was brutally strangled. Enter DI Erica Martin, who is tasked with finding the killer. As she digs deeper into the life of the university and its students, Erica uncovers a subculture of slut-shaming, cyberbullying and abuse. All fascinating and important topics, and an interesting hook for a crime thriller. Unfortunately, this book was let down by really amateurish writing.

I'm not generally a pedantic reader. I can handle a few badly structured sentences or misjudged metaphors, as long as I'm invested enough in the plot and characters to keep reading (case in point: I LOVED the two Robert Galbraith books and there were more than a few examples of iffy writing in those). But with this book, I found the writing so problematic all the way through that I just couldn't get past it to the plot. It's worth mentioning that the book was structured with chapters set in the present describing Erica's progress on the investigation alternating with chapters set in the past and told from the perspective of one of Emily's friends, and the latter are significantly better written than the former. The problems I had with the book were manifold but included:

- Completely incorrect words being used, seemingly in an attempt to sound artistic/intelligent. For example, we have a young man looking ahead to his tedious life and dreading 'infinitesimal' cups of tea. What's wrong with tiny, microscopic cups of tea??? Why would you use infinitesimal rather than infinite anyway? Because it's longer? As stated before, I don't know whether this will be sorted out before the final copy is published in two weeks, but one would sincerely hope so.

- Long words that *kind of* make sense being used for no reason. Like the track that 'circumnavigated' the

sports field. I don't think that this is strictly the right use of circumnavigate but let's offer some creative license. Even then, it's just annoying that when long words are being used that don't add anything. 'Around' would do fine. We also have someone who has just been informed of a gruesome murder and who is presumably in a state of shock being described as being in a reverie. Reverie means being lost in pleasant thoughts, not being unable to speak due to shock.

- Absent commas that made me have to re-read a sentence a few times to work out what was being said. As above, hopefully this will be ironed out in the final copy.

- Silly and annoying ways of describing dialogue, e.g. "Blah blah?" QUESTIONED Martin', or even worse 'QUERIED Martin'. Just use 'asked'. Creative writing instructors tell people to use 'said' or 'asked' for good reason, and you only realise what that reason is until you read something written by someone who either didn't get that memo or ignored it.

- Badly structured sentences that didn't make sense. Just one example - one of the characters is musing about the dangers of a group of physics students who had designed their own rockets. He decides that a bunch of geeks shouldn't be in charge of setting off explosives in a public place that they themselves had designed - sorry, are they physicists or town planners?

- 'Which' EVERYWHERE. Why not give 'that' a go every once in a while?

- Sooooo many redundant words. Sentences that could easily be tightened up.

These are just a few examples. The overall effect was that no matter how much I tried to immerse myself in the plot and characters, I just couldn't.

Another MAJOR issue for me was that this is a book about cyberbullying on sites such as Twitter and Facebook which appears to have been written by a person who has never used either. E.g. after the victim is found dead, DI Martin goes online to look at her Facebook profile. One of the most recent posts on her wall is a picture of herself performing a sex act (or having sex? I'm not entirely sure) and underneath the photo are a range of slut-shaming comments from trolls. Supposedly, the photo had been posted months before she died. Later, in the flashback chapters, the victim is asked why she couldn't just delete the photo. And she says that she can't access it apart from to comment on it because she has been fraped?? My jaw actually dropped at the amateurishness of this:

a) fraping is when someone accesses your account as you and posts something as you to embarrass you. It's gone hugely out of fashion nowadays, but I have seen some genuinely funny frapes in my time (e.g. people whose profiles had been changed into shrines to the 1980s band Toto, or someone who logged in and found that they had 100 new friends all with the same surname as them). If she was indeed fraped, then the photos would have been uploaded onto her own account and she could delete them straight away.

b) If someone else had uploaded the photo of her, it wouldn't appear on her wall unless she was tagged in it, in which case she could just de-tag it and report it to Facebook. Facebook, despite their many flaws, are always quick to respond to requests to take explicit photos down. I once had a photo of a friend taken down because it was of him putting his finger through his fly and pretending it was his willy (sophisticated eh?), and I was banned from posting photos for a week.

c) If she had been fraped and then locked out of her account then she would have been able to report this to Facebook, because the account would have been linked to her email address.

d) the comments on the photos were all posted from fake profiles with names like 'Princess87' ?!?!

Seriously? Has this author literally never been on Facebook? I'm not even going to get in to how wrong that is. Anyone who's ever been on Facebook will instantly see why that's stupid.

I think it's fine for authors to write on topics that they're not intimately familiar with, but do a bit of research first. It's not like it would be particularly onerous to set up a Facebook profile.

Gosh, this is turning into more of a rant than I thought it would be.

Right, what else? The characters were predominantly one-dimensional, mainly because of the way they spoke. I don't think many of them would have passed the Turing test. The dialogue was very clichéd.

I found it aggravating that the main character was constantly referred to as 'Martin', even in the context of her interacting with her mother or her husband (they didn't actually call her Martin, to be fair, but that's how she was referred to). I don't know if this is meant to be some kind of statement about gender, Martin being a male name and all, but it just didn't work for me. It's not the 1950s anymore, while police officers might be referred to by their surname sometimes, it doesn't happen all of the time.

Also, slightly random point but one that I've only just realised - the title has NOTHING to do with the book? I don't know where it even came from. It's a good title though and it's got a nice cover so whatever.

So, the question remaining is 'why two stars and not one?' The answer to that is mainly to do with the fact that this was an ARC. If this was the final version then I would have given it one star. But I feel that I should give the editors the benefit of the doubt and assume that what I read is not what will hit bookshelves in a few weeks' time. But at the same time, if this book was edited into a three- or a four-star book, the changes required would be so substantial that it would be a fundamentally different book to the one I just read.

Also, I did read the entire book. The plot wasn't groundbreaking but, taken in isolation, it was OK. I DNF'd two books within the last six weeks, but Bitter Fruits made it onto my 'Read' shelf, and that has to count for something.

I'll look forward to checking back on the reviews of this book in six months or so to see whether people who read the published copy have similar things to say about the writing style. I'd like to know by how much the ARC I was given differs from the published version.

Penelope says

Book review

Bitter Fruits by Alice Clark-Platt

A interesting murder mystery

For a first novel this book keeps you hooked, draws you in, endears you to the characters and gives you a lovely twist at the end.

This style of book is exactly what I enjoy. Something to grip my imagination and that makes me try beat the story line to work out who did the deed. Well two thirds of the way through I worked it out but although I was right, I was also wrong. In order to explain that I would need to give away the catch and that would not be fair you need to read the book, enjoy it and find out for yourself.

DI Martin is a character I would like to read more of in the future. Her first case in a new county and job was definitely, as Doctor Walsh predicts at the the beginning, "a baptism of fire", but she got her killer and

proved her worth.

Bill Kupersmith says

As you drive into the city, the view of Durham Cathedral above the river is an absolute knock-out & I so wish I could contrive a reason to return. Failing that, I've done the next best & enjoyed a murder mystery set in the university. With its different narrators & dialects, this was a perfect Audible book for car, foot & elliptical machine - unstoppable to the end. I cannot claim to have sussed it tho' I spotted all the principal clues, but failed to imagine which ones fit together & how, even tho' Alice Clark-Platts plays absolutely square with the reader - we know what DI Martin knows when she does. I quite liked the voice given the detective. She's supposed to be from Newcastle & whilst not quite Geordie (I'd have had trouble understanding her if it were) had a northern flavour & listening brought out a peculiarity I might not have caught in print. The timing of her style of interrogation reminded me so much of Detective Colombo's - concluding an apparently innocuous conversation with a pause & then as a seemingly casual afterthought, asking the killer query that homes in on the suspect like an Exocet missile & blows the fishy alibi clear out of the water. Do they teach this @ detective school?

Despite the uni setting, this is not a story like *The Secret History* or *After I Left You* about good friends. Despite their claims, the students are frenemies @ best - most appropriately in a story featuring the very current topics of online-bullying & revenge-porn. Additionally, the supporting cast of parents, uni administrators, & a local journalist, all have something dubious about them. That the minor characters are so well depicted actually seems like a flaw as they vanish @ the end with so many conflicts unresolved in the reader's mind. For me that was especially true for Annabelle, who would have been the victim Emily's BF if I'd been writing this book. We also are given only glimpses of DI Martin's backstory & personal life = she has clearly a lot of baggage. So no 5th star for a good one-time read.

Carol Peace says

I was fortunate n getting my copy from Real Readers before publication for an honest review. Detective Inspector Martin had just joined the Durham police force and straight away had a murder to deal with. Emily Brabens is found dead in the weir and as DI Martin goes to the college to inform them and find out what she could about the dead girl she is surprised to find one of the fellow students confess immediately Simon Rush said he had pushed her into the weir. When DI Martin and DS Jones question him at the station all is not as it seems. Emily tried so hard to fit in at the college but she had seemed to go the wrong way about it and had only one true friend, Daniel Shepherd. Did Simon really kill Emily? and why?. As they delve further into the private lives of the students a sordid picture emerges and throughout the whole investigation the reader is treated to an insight from the killer with pages of his or her thoughts but never indicating who they are. The twist nearing the end is surprising but wait! that's not the only one. I very rarely enjoy a book this much and Alice Clark-Platts has hit the ground running with this first novel. I hope there are many more to come as I will definately be looking out for them.

Carol - Reading Writing and Riesling says

My View:

A brilliant debut novel - considered and intelligent this book discusses the murder of a young woman and explores the psychology of those involved and follows the trail that lead to her death. Tightly woven into the fabric of this multi faced narrative are the some very relevant contemporary social issues; identity, feminism, online bullying, abuse of trust and power and sexism.

This narrative steers a clear path to discovery; this is not a book that is character lead, although there are several interesting characters here and I hope to see more of DI Martin in the future; this is an expose of evilness, obsession, narcissism and control and demonstrates just how easily the inexperienced can be manipulated- in persona and online. The influence of social media on the “look at me” generation is revealing and disturbing.

The dual narration works particularly well and slowly you are drawn into the campus social world and the lives of the main characters. As your involvement deepens the pace picks up and a psychological war zone is entered – a battle between good and evil - between DI Martina and the villain of the peace.

The twist in the conclusion, when revealed, is totally unexpected and packs an enormous punch! A great read.

Latkins says

This is a superior murder mystery, partly seen from the point of view of the police in Durham, who are investigating the murder of a young student at the university there, and partly narrated by another mysterious student, Daniel. It's very well-written, and explores themes of the exploitation of women and the dangers of the internet and social media. The murdered woman, Emily, acts all too believably in her attempts to gain favour with the rich and privileged men at the university, and the ending holds a killer twist.

Thomas Strömquist says

Pretty much what you expect of a police procedural/murder mystery, but with a few qualities that I felt really lifted it up a notch or two. First off, the writing is good and so is the story. Just the right amount of suspension of disbelief is needed to accept the happenings, but still get a surprise or two. The characters are good too, the pain and confusion of the college kids trying to find their place and role makes for engaging reading. Best is, however, DI Erica Martin herself, and oddly enough on account of being quite normal and quite discreet. I found it a great relief to find a heroine that did not fall into any of the quirky, anti-social, self-destructive, ridiculously beautiful, overbearingly righteous, anarchistic, unfairly treated, overly sexual, action sport adrenaline junky - or any combination of the above - category. I'm looking forward to finding out where she goes in the next in the series.

Kate says

Personally I thoroughly enjoyed this novel. Kept me intrigued throughout & im already looking forward to reading more from this new author.

Have to say I found a previous review completely outrageous & it makes me wonder if the reviewer has a

more "personal" agenda?

I for one will be recommending it to my book club & other friends!!!

Tom Platts says

First class thriller, and an excellent debut by someone who can best be described as a beautiful, technically-gifted writer.

The characterisation is sophisticated and entirely believable. The story is on point, and the writing style and use of language is second to none.

Well done Clark-Platts on a stunning first novel. Bring on the next one.

Rachel Hall says

Bitter Fruits is an impressive debut novel which is both police procedural and part psychological thriller and proves gripping, eerily atmospheric and sheds light on the inescapable pressures and strains that come with being thrown into an all consuming environment; specifically one of the bastions of higher education and privilege that can be alien territory to those unprepared for the experience. This is a story which explores the death of a student from both the aspect of establishing guilt, right through to the underpinnings and psychology of those closely linked to the victim in the run up to her demise. Newly transplanted from Newcastle CID to the hallowed university town of Durham, just three-weeks into her new job sees DI Erica Martin given a baptism of fire when Regatta weekend results in the discovery of Joyce College fresher, Emily Brabents, dead body in the weir. With eyes glazed, clad in only a t-shirt, evidence of self harming and nasty marks around her neck, DI Martin suspects murder. But with an off the bat confession from a fellow student, elected president Simon Rush, an overly involved College President, Phillip Mason, and a college culture of trolling, cyber-bullying and online sexual harassment rife, DI Martin and her sidekick, DS Jones, have their work cut out. With Rush promptly handed over for a psychiatric evaluation DI Martin attempts to gain a handle on Emily's complex personality and finds herself faced with a naive and insecure young woman under the misconception that allowing gratuitous and pornographic photos and videos of herself to be circulated somehow equated to empowering feminist behaviour.

The majority of the storyline is narrated in the third person and focuses on DI Martin's endeavours, however this is complemented with the interspersed journal entries of sensitive English student and outsider, Daniel Shepherd, with his deeply ironic and scathing view of the culture within the university, and some snippy commentary by online journalist, Sean Egan of The Durham Chronicle. Distinctions between each of these elements of the narrative are well-marked and this make-up draws the reader into a fascinating expose of the salacious details of the permissive student culture, some of which is admittedly a little far-fetched (Emily's willingness for photos to be openly shared, not to mention that the college authorities knowingly permitting such behaviour). With DI Martin and DS Jones attempting to get to grips with Emily's social circle and pinning down her immature best friend, Annabel, and odious boyfriend, Nick, as they wait to resume questioning Simon Rush, suspicion starts to fall on Emily's background and quick-tempered father, Michael Brabents. However, as the mysterious Daniel Shepherd refuses to surface, DI Martin attempts to clarify his

part in Emily's story through his email correspondence with compromised university counsellor, Stephanie Suleiman. Although the pace of the investigation does flounder a little as the second half opens and the convoluted denouement risks confusion, the superior psychological aspects of Bitter Fruits makes this a solid four star read.

DI Erica Martin is more of a thinker as opposed to a grafter and remains an enigmatic presence as she conducts operations under the eyes of the university and a local media who seems to be curiously well-informed. As pressure comes from her superiors and with tourism and university morale reliant on and speedy resolution, DI Martin's steadfast refusal to be rushed is to her credit. Having moved to the market town of Chester-le-Street, Martin's marriage is increasingly showing strains with her older husband, Jim, slow to settle in and Bitter Fruits hints at a latent attraction between her and boss, DCI Sam Butterworth although this is never explored. However, for the most part, Clark-Platts lets an gritty plot and untangling the mess drive the novel and thankfully does not seem to feel the need to encumber her protagonist with either maverick tendencies or myriad problems. It is this sound emphasis on getting to grips with who Emily was as opposed to the facade she presented before going on to explore just what has made her a victim that is the focus of the novel and introduces a distinctive voice to the world of crime fiction.

I have a predisposition to novels with an academic setting and having had a similar university experience to Durham and a sister who attended, I felt it really captured the often stifling atmosphere and the desire to fit in and be accepted amongst ones peers. Some of the pretentiousness surrounding revered Joyce College was, I fear, a little over-embellished more from the side of the college authorities who seemed to willingly buy into the whole culture of bullying which is a ludicrously unlikely scenario. Whilst I doubt that such a culture would ever be allowed to rear its head in such a cloistered college setting, this does not stop Bitter Fruits proving compelling and memorably different from the ranks of mainstream crime fiction. Clark-Platts has crafted a literary debut crime novel which is intelligently written and makes some insightful and damning points on an increasingly digital age where the younger generations can be drawn into a dog-eat-dog world of online naming and shaming and go to extraordinary lengths to be accepted by their peers. This is a series that I intend to continue with and I have already purchased Alice Clark-Platts follow-up, The Taken, featuring a return for DI Erica Martin.

sue says

I know this book has been out a while now and I am trying to go backwards in my line of read to reviews.

This is a great debut novel, I notice a lot of debut novels that are coming out recently have been of a high standard and have really captured my attention, this one being of the same mind. Its haunting.

Emily the girl who was murdered is a very complicated girl, I found her character very interesting.

The Investigation into her death and the minds of those surrounding it were awesome.

A little more about the detective would be have been good, a bit surrounding him.

But this just a minor thing for me, doesn't spoil the book, just something I would prefer personally.

My thanks to Penguin UK - Michael Joseph via Net Galley for my copy

Julietta Henderson says

Wonderful! Bitter Fruits makes gripping reading from beginning to end. Alice Clark Platts has produced one of the most confident and compelling debut novels I've read in a long while. Can't wait to see more from this talented lady.

Jo Furniss says

In this refreshingly smart and thought-provoking crime thriller, DI Erica Martin investigates the pernicious culture of cyber-bullying that dominates the lives of students at Durham University. The murder of a Fresher is Martin's first case after arriving in the city. Martin herself soon comes under the scrutiny of the local online media - getting a bitter taste of the kind of invisible trolling and emotional harassment that the victim herself was suffering in the weeks before she died. While Bitter Fruits is a classic page-turning crime fiction - with an early unreliable confession, quickly followed by a second victim, and ending on a dramatic twist - it also digs deep into the psychological territory of contemporary social issues. For anyone over the age of 25-30, it opens the lid on an unimaginably distressing world of sexting, trolling and inescapable online bullying. It leaves me glad that I'm neither a detective nor a student in today's cyber-dominated world. Bitter Fruits will appeal to fans of crime fiction, but also to readers who appreciate psychological drama of unusually high quality.
