



The Storyteller

Kate Armstrong

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'A strange, compelling work... A considerable achievement.' Craig Raine

'Shall we start again?'

A young woman regains consciousness. An elegant old lady degenerates into flailing madness. A beggar counts small change on Westminster Bridge. Hot summer afternoons transform into autumn and winter days and back to summer again.

At first, Iris and Rachel are linked only by their illness, but as they heal they grow closer, and soon they are enmeshed in a relationship neither can escape. When Iris insists on writing Rachel's biography the younger woman is unable to resist; but is her life being reported or created by her self-appointed storyteller?

With a claustrophobic intensity of vision, *The Storyteller* is a challenging, beautifully written novel of disconnect, insanity and reawakening.

The Storyteller Details

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Author : Kate Armstrong

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From Reader Review The Storyteller for online ebook

Paul Fulcher says

Here is what I suggest:

That, bound together in this circle of hell, we talk fondly like sisters and we share our stories. That together we unveil what has happened in your life to bring you here, what is happening now, and what the future will be. What, and why, and what it means. That we work to create your tale.

(Your nod is tentative. But the doors are locked and you have nowhere else to go)

Kate Armstrong's The Storyteller is a innovative and striking work from a debut novelist. It was longlisted for the wonderful new Republic of Consciousness Prize for works from small independent presses that meet the criteria of 'hardcore literary fiction and gorgeous prose'. The Storyteller certainly does that, and was, in my view, unfortunate not to make the (admittedly very strong) shortlist.

The Storyteller features two women, the older Iris Buchanan and the younger Rachel Miller. Both are in a psychiatric unit, Iris (who is, or claims to be, a romantic novelist as well as titled) a longer-standing patient, and Rachel recently arrived after a breakdown and suicide attempt.

Iris proposes to write Rachel's story - not so much how she arrived at the hospital but the story of her recovery and rehabilitation.

Rachel is initially visited in the hospital by Peter, a man she had only recently become acquainted with but on whose doorstep she collapsed after the suicide attempt, dragging him into her orbit. But when she is discharged he, reassured that she is recovering, decides to give her space, and she tries to form new relationships.

Armstrong's novel uses the unusual technique of second-person narration (Rachel's story told back to her by Iris). In the context of this story, it has two interesting effects.

Firstly, we are unclear how much of what we are reading actually happened, how much is Iris inventing what she thinks ought to have happened to Rachel, how much is her re-living her own life through the younger woman, and how much she has actively interfered in Rachel's story. E.g. this when she tells Rachel details of Peter's visits unknown to her, including how she spoke to Peter before she had even spoken to Rachel:

What you don't know is that I know more. Yes, my dear, no need for shock. The story is not just yours to tell: we agreed to thrash out how much editorial control you have, but, for the record, there are parts which I will add. The view from the chair, my perspective, as it were. And those voices that came when he left the room, that wasn't the nurses, that was me. You take me for a fool, but I was (in advance) protecting my investment of effort and time. From outside your room I saw him emerge.

Secondly, Armstrong very powerfully describes the process of mental unravelling and then putting the pieces back together than accompanies mental illness. The second person narration by Iris is more powerful than a third-person voice would be, but also gets around the practical problem of how a first-person narrator could comment on their own mental state (one which Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook failed to resolve).

What Rachel goes through is told to her by someone who knows, because she has been through the same thing:

There are creepers round the windows of the gothic wing bathed in the afternoon sunshine, sheltering birds in their tendrils, holding them safe despite the promise of night. A blue tit is nodding at the window, his wings chattering as he balances, and flutters, and settles, only to fly round the corner and out of your sight. Peter sees with satisfaction the movement in your eyes, the twist in your neck as you twitch to follow the life that is darting and ducking in the breeze.

You are moving closer to taking back your part in life. From nothing you became clay-like, taking the impression of small realities around you. The weight of your limbs set up an ache in your hip; your knees scraped on the floorboards and your skin reddened in sympathy; you drank and your veins swelled to fullness. The signals have begun to return to your brain. Your responses are logical, have a prompt and a purpose, are connected to facts of life which are shared by people around you.

The author also has her own blog which aided my understanding of the novel including her own experiences with depression but also why this is avowedly not autobiographical fiction:

There's one issue I'm facing again and again as I try to become whatever sort of writer is the right writer for me to be: my first book is a coming of age novel, its central character is a young woman, and depression and recovery are writ large. Told that, people assume it is autobiographical, and I assume they will assume that and so I'm embarrassed to talk about its content at all. Here's one for the record: it's a novel – it's a work of fiction.

(<https://katejarmstrong.wordpress.com/...>)

Worthwhile, a novel that deserves greater attention and an author to watch.

Dare I even say a The Golden Notebook for the 21st century.

Kilian Metcalf says

This is a book for someone looking for something different. It is the story of two women meeting in a mental hospital. The story of the younger women is told by the older woman. It is difficult to decide whether or not she is an unreliable narrator. Gradually bit by bit, the younger woman's story emerges. This book should appeal to readers who are looking for an unconventional method of telling a story.

Thanks to Netgalley for ARC.

Brian says

A young woman is released from hospital after suffering an episode of mental illness. She becomes involved in a series of emotionally inarticulate relationships and is befriended by an older woman, also with a history of mental illness, and it is this older woman who relates the protagonist's story.

It should be clear from this summary that The Storyteller is not a plot-driven book. Rather, it is an attempt to express the intense, disassociated and sometimes kaleidoscopic thoughts of an individual trying to re-make

herself after the fabric of her personality has been shattered.

What makes this book stand out is the quality of the prose, which is compelling, often disturbingly so, as the author seeks to map out the margins of consciousness. Here, for example, is the protagonist sitting on the top deck of a bus:

“The glass of the window by your face thins and then dissolves. The woman, the cars, the litter, the patches in the pavement merge into one and instantly you are above it all. You see that the town is the wormy flesh of a brain. The traffic and its lights are the electric pulses, the transmitters that absorb and release charge, that create the regulation on which the world depends.”

Kate Armstrong’s ability to range from tiny and absorbing details to great sweeping patterns of significance as her central character struggles to assemble meaning out of the welter of sense-impressions that constitutes the everyday world recalls the writing of Virginia Woolf.

This is one of those novels that reminds you of the fragility of our humanity and of its preciousness.

Jenny Cooper says

A very unusual debut novel which manages to get inside the mind of a very troubled woman who has descended into madness and is on a very slow road to recovery.

I’m not sure I fully understood it all but the author does do a fantastic job of making the workings of a very disturbed mind accessible to someone like me who has never (thankfully) experienced anything like this emotional state first-hand. The writing style is quite strange and experimental. The stream of consciousness aspects of it allow you to enter the mind of Rachel in a way which I wouldn’t have believed possible, but there are overtones of Kafka in there as well. It is not a comfortable read because the main character, Rachel, is trapped in a living nightmare – her mind is in turmoil (when it has not shut down completely to protect herself) and her day-to-day existence is, at best, merely a state of “functioning”. It is an extremely powerful book, written by a very accomplished author who has clearly experienced depression at some point in her life and has managed to capture that mental state and translate it into the written word – a rare talent. It is such a raw piece of storytelling that it sometimes feels as though you are intruding at such a deep and intimate level that you really have no right to be there. To be honest, I felt like a voyeur at times. I can only hope that the process of writing was cathartic.

Another issue I had with it was that the start was very confusing – the reader doesn’t know who the people are, who is “speaking” or what is going on. In actual fact, there are two people involved, both experiencing recovery from depression, madness and torment. One of these, Iris, has persuaded Rachel to relate her story. This gives us two unreliable narrators, one chronicling the other’s story. No wonder it is confusing at times. In retrospect it is very obvious why it is written this way as it depicts the state of mind of the individuals involved in a very powerful way. However, the down side of that is that I think the author may lose a lot of readers early on/before the novel really gets going.

Would I recommend this book to someone? To be honest I am not sure that I would. I just spent too much time feeling uncomfortable and confused. Had it been ultimately uplifting then maybe I would have felt differently by the time I finished it, but it wasn’t, and I didn’t. I really don’t like only giving the book 2 stars

as I think it was a fantastic achievement – I really mean that and I am very glad I have read it. When all's said and done, it just wasn't for me.

Cat says

This book is so rich and absorbing that I had to read it twice, some time apart, so that I could fully appreciate it.

The premise is that an author is recounting a younger woman's story back to her, and I've never read another book that utilises second person so well. This manipulation of meaning and narrative makes for fascinating reading and meant I had to work to understand the ostensible protagonist (Rachel) and the narrative voice (Iris). My feelings about both characters were very strong but constantly fluctuating thanks to Armstrong's skilfully timed revelations.

Reading *The Storyteller* a second time has allowed me a greater understanding of the characters' relationship and motivations, which is why I've upgraded my rating from 4 to 5 stars.

Juliet O'callaghan says

Check out my review on booktube, where I compare *The Storyteller* with *Eleanor Oliphant* !

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ECugH...>

Earl says

Kate Armstrong's debut novel *The Storyteller* is a beautifully written work that, I think, can be understood in several ways, or at least from several perspectives. I was unsure initially what I was reading yet even with that shadow of uncertainty I was drawn in.

On one level this is a young woman's story told back to her through the voice and perspective of an older woman. The fact they meet in a mental ward opens the novel to various readings. Is the story being told by the older woman true? Okay, what is true anyway, maybe better: is the story being told factual? Hmm, okay, factual as verifiable by an outside observer since we all have perceptions and those perceptions are facts. not necessarily the content of the perceptions but the existence of the perceptions. Honest, the book is not nearly as pretzel-like as what I just wrote. The beauty is that it allows a reader to begin asking questions about the story that carry over into questions about life as a whole.

I like to think of the story as being skeletally fairly "factual" but many of the details to be a synthesis of what the older woman learned about what happened and her own experiences coping with similar situations and feelings. What is easy to overlook until you stop and reflect is that we are also getting a version of the older woman's life as well.

What are our lives other than stories? Stories we tell, stories others tell and the stories we co-write with almost everyone else in our lives. This book looks at life stories and in some ways questions just who gets to tell a person's story. We are often unreliable narrators of our own lives but others do not have access to all of the details, so who tells it and in what setting?

I would highly recommend this to readers of literary fiction as well as those interested in psychological studies of characters. We all have far more in common with these two women than we likely realize and empathetically understanding them will help us better understand ourselves.

Reviewed from a copy made available through Goodreads' First Reads.

Jackie Law says

“Do not take this moment lightly. Tread gently on its paths. This time too will never come again.”

The Storyteller, by Kate Armstrong, is a tale woven from the intricate threads of a life damaged by tragedy. Iris Buchanan is teasing the details from Rachel Miller, a young woman she has come to know in the psychiatric hospital where they are both being treated. Iris tells Rachel that she used to write romantic novels and wishes to lay down her life story in this vein. The book is their discussion told from Iris's point of view.

As Rachel talks of her experiences the reader can see that Iris is adding in her own. She is possessive, at times voyeuristic in her fact gathering. There are echoes of Barbara from Heller's 'Notes on a Scandal' although this is a very different work.

The events recounted are almost an aside to the heightened level of consciousness detailed. Rachel feels deeply: her isolation, the beauty of a sunrise, background noise, the tidy formation of geese in flight. She knows that she must move beyond her sharpened sensory perceptions and her tendency to repeatedly overthink interactions if she is to appear as those she cannot avoid expect.

After a spell in hospital Rachel is discharged and returns to her empty flat. She forms a relationship with a man from downstairs which Iris attempts to weave into a form that she finds pleasing. Rachel insists that elements of the truth as she sees it be made clear.

The setting of the story changes as the narrative progresses. The true and fictional accounts intertwine offering questions of what is memory and what desire.

This is a complex novel with moments of clarity offering hints as to the cause of the women's mental distress. What is happening can at times be bewildering but is intriguing to read. The women's quest for social normalcy remains hauntingly elusive, the personal cost of their mental breakdown becoming clear. It is interesting to consider how normal anyone truly is inside their own head; if given the option who would choose to start again.

My copy of this book was provided gratis by the publisher, Holland House.

Katy says

For a short novel, this left me reeling. The writing is exceptional, rhythmic and highly engaging. The humanity, compassion and respect left me in awe. It's intense and powerful. It is definitely a book I will come back to time and time again.

Kate says

2.5*

It's a strange yet compelling and exhausting tale; boy, Iris tired me out. I still don't know what I read and what I really think, even hours after finishing it! I enjoyed it, for the most part. The second person narrative works very well, but I feel the story is too long. There are thriller vibes to the story. I was on the edge of my seat waiting for the twist, but I'm not sure whether it came. I think I saw something, but I'm really not sure.... I liked what I read, I'm just not sure what I read!

Wilsonn says

A quite brilliant, unusual thing of a book. The writing plays successfully with perspective, moving back and forth between second- and first-person, and has strands throughout of beautiful prose. The story is largely about depression--profoundly debilitating depression--yet still manages momentum, interest, clarity, curiosity, strangeness, and the spare laugh. I love a story that asks to be told more than once, and the narrative here is structured to facilitate just such a thing; not that it is necessary, only very rewarding: the patterns and shadows reveal themselves for the clockwork-like cohesion they have been all along. The Storyteller is a strong debut, a great read, and has left me eager for the author's next.

You can actually listen to the author read the first few pages:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTq42...>

Jo Hurst says

This has one star simply because Goodreads doesn't allow me to score lower. A terrible book. Grossly overwritten and utterly pretentious in style. I can understand why some would find the style poetic or even beautiful but the author has obviously spent a lot of time finely crafting each word to fit into a 'proper literature' genre. This is done at the expense of both knowledge and storyline. I think the author is simply trying to be too clever but she lacks proper mental health knowledge. As a mental health professional I am frustrated at books that deal with the subject so irresponsibly. Surely the publishers should check details? Even if the authors idea is to tell the story through the deteriorating mind of a patient she still has no excuse for such awful blatant factual errors. The back cover tells of a woman regaining consciousness. This is not dealt with in the book. The character appears to be Catatonic not unconscious. If she were unconscious she would not be in a mental health ward. It truly saddens me that it's books like this that define how many people view mental health services. In reality neither character would be Discharged with no aftercare and abandoned like this book claims. An overwritten pretentious pile of rubbish that the publishers should be ashamed off. A book to be avoided.

Melissa says

This is a very strange book. I can't say I liked it, exactly, but it was an interesting experience so I don't really regret it either. It's a tough read; not one for entertainment. I might have missed critical information because it's barely mentioned, in passing (as indeed a mentally unbalanced person might do), & I was still confused at the end. You might think the use of second person would make it more personal, yet it's an incredibly disconnecting narrative instead.

Lolly K Dandeneau says

via my blog: <https://bookstalkerblog.wordpress.com/>

'You are both mutually unhappy. But that in itself need not be a problem. Let's face it, happiness is usually boring. This way you both have something interesting to say.'

This is a strange novel, literary fiction into madness but whose? How reliable is the storyteller? I feel like I spent the majority of this novel in a fog. Two women, Iris and Rachel. Rachel has slowly awakened after a suicide attempt, and her story is being retold- but by Iris (romance author, madwoman, old woman). Peter is on the periphery, as Rachel had just begun to become involved with him. Of course he visits at first, pulled into her mental breakdown, her life disaster, but he isn't in love- is he? Iris imagines a wild love triangle, invents stories, because what is there to live for if not stories, if you can't take realities material and twist and warp it, make it more exciting. Or is it just Iris's mind that is twisted, warped? How do the two women, one at the start of her life, the other closer to the end, find themselves like sisters of the mind?

Both women have slipped out of reality. Iris has been a patient in the psychiatric hospital for so long trapped in her insanity, she is a lady, having her tea. She imagines a different reality. Here is where the reader feels they are attending their own mad tea party, Iris is going to be writing the biography of Rachel's life, her breakdown. Incoherence, unreliability, and if Rachel is more like a captive to the old woman, then so is the reader. Just what is Lady Buchanan's story? In Peter, there is the shock of those who are not cracked, the curious horror of being party to self-destruction.

Rachel, "you have woken up. You have seen the shadow, seen your hand, and now finally you have remembered. You have remembered that you want to die." Will she recover? How will her life story end, in Iris's hands? As she tries to find stable footing in the aftermath of her breakdown, she has to disconnect from the 'before', start fresh. But can you ever abandon yourself, shed the old life and in hope, find stability? How does a beggar with her 'junk shop ring' play into everything? Close the book, end the tale...

This is a novel in disassociation, I felt a bit unhinged and lost myself. It's not for people that can't bear stream of consciousness or unreliable second person stories, because you don't really have solid footing, and though it feeds the madness, not every reader fancies this style. Good, but I had moments of frustration too. It's an unraveling and a desperate scramble to try and create a semblance of reality.

Available Now

Holland House

Jayne says

Thought provoking

I came across this novel when it was listed for The Republic of Consciousness prize for small presses. I'm very impressed with it. The Storyteller is a frustrated novelist in a mental health institution who narrates the story of a fellow resident. It's a fascinating example of second person narrative and description of madness as well as a study of character creation. I would recommend to any fan of contemporary literary fiction.
