



Alys, Always

Harriet Lane

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Frances is a thirty-something sub-editor, an invisible production drone on the books pages of the Questioner. Her routine and colourless existence is disrupted one winter evening when she happens upon the aftermath of a car crash and hears the last words of the driver, Alys Kyte. When Alys's family makes contact in an attempt to find closure, Frances is given a tantalising glimpse of a very different world: one of privilege and possibility. The relationships she builds with the Kytes will have an impact on her own life, both professionally and personally, as Frances dares to wonder whether she might now become a player in her own right.

Alys, Always Details

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The emperor has no clothes. You know when you find yourself checking the clock during a movie or eyeing the measure of remaining pages in a book with an increasing sense of unease of how the story will wrap up in a satisfactory way and then....it doesn't. Sometimes it turns out it was just a dumb story to begin with that goes nowhere. Welcome to *Alys, Always*. We're supposed to shiver at the depths of cunning and deceit of the main character, Frances in her quest to "rise above" her pedestrian lineage and upbringing. But the reader is given too little background on her pathological desire and without it, her generally crappy personality makes this tale difficult to read. In fact, each character in this novel is a poorly fleshed out, miserable SOB that elicits neither interest nor empathy. At the end, you'll want to shout "who the hell cares and why did I waste my time reading this"?

Tea Leaves and Reads says

For an acclaimed psychological thriller, this was pretty weak. Maybe it's the inner psychotic inside me that thinks there could have been so much more made of this, or maybe actually many others agree. I was waiting for the crunch, the big one, the bit where she so wildly oversteps the line there is no going back. Yes she manipulates, yes there are the occasional crazy behaviors dropped in but it's not enough.

I felt that the characters surrounding Frances could have been explored a bit more, some more insight perhaps. The various flashbacks to childhood occurring when on the beach or near the sand were never really explained, whilst that's cute, actually by the end I wanted an explanation. Difficult childhood, difficult parents, whatever, I just wanted to know what had driven this woman to behave in the way she did, which, as I've said, could have been fifty times more psychologically disturbing.

Maciek says

Alys, Always is Harriet Lane's debut novel, narrated in the first person by Frances Thorpe - a quiet and rather unremarkable person, who works as a sub-editor for the book section of *The Observer* and lives alone in her north London flat, having few friends and socializing very infrequently.

Frances is resigned to her life being little more than the plodding job and solitude, until one day she witnesses a traffic accident. Frances pulls over and approaches the crashed vehicle, noticing that a woman is crushed behind the wheel, but remains alive; she comforts the woman, whose name is Alice, and remains with her until the police arrive; unfortunately, Alice dies from her injuries soon afterwards. Frances is soon discovers that Alice's real name was Alys, and that her husband is the famous novelist, the Booker winning Laurence Kyte - as his family contacts her, in order to learn about Alys's last few moments...allowing Frances an entrance onto the London literary scene, letting her walk in the world she used to know only on paper.

Harriet Lane writes engagingly, and the novel maintains a good pace. Frances's voice is compelling enough to make us want to turn the page, and her transformation - from a mundane newspaper worker to a careful schemer who keeps her cards close and plans out her actions in advance to ensure she'll get what she wants - is an interesting, if predictable one. But there is simply not enough material here to make it unique - shades of *Rebecca* and *What Was She Thinking?* Notes on a Scandal are present throughout (at one point Frances even picks up a copy of *Rebecca* from a shelf), but we're simply not given enough insight into Frances herself as to understand her desires and the choices that she makes, which makes them feel scripted instead of something we'd expect her to do. The novel feels more like an earlier and incomplete draft, or a screenplay which would benefit from the actors' talent and craftsmanship. The big moment - Frances crossing the point of no return - never happened, and after finishing reading I was left wanting and disappointed.

Cyndi says

I kinda thought I'd like this book, but alas. Woe is me. ????? Our heroine begins the story with a life in black and white. Soon she steps into the life of a dead woman and begins to color her life in. She manipulates people and her retribution is a happily ever after. Yeah...a bit weird.?????

Carol says

It took a bit to get started, but once it did I enjoyed this novel about a woman who ingratiates herself into the family of a celebrated novelist and his rarefied social circles. Frances Thorpe's fixation with Laurence Kyte's family and lifestyle was reminiscent of Nora's obsession with the Shahid family in Claire Messud's, *The Woman Upstairs*. Frances wasn't quite as angry as Nora; but, both women divulge personal thoughts of a stifled life and career. Likewise, the object of their obsession represents all that they desire for themselves.

At first, Frances appears to be rather mild and inoffensive. Then the story slowly unfolds to reveal her much more complex (and manipulative) ulterior motivations. The reader may be exposed to her intensions but the other characters in the novel are mostly oblivious.

Very well written, pared down and quietly disturbing...my favorite kind of novel.

Leanne says

In the vein of *Notes on a Scandal* and *The Woman Upstairs*, *Alys, Always* focuses on a character who's on the outside looking in. Mid-thirties and single, working as an uncelebrated and unnoticed editor of a flailing newspaper, Frances Thorpe quite simply lives an unremarkable life. One night, driving home, she encounters a serious car accident and keeps the driver company as they wait for an ambulance to arrive. The driver turns out to be Alys Kyte, wife of well-respected author Laurence Kyte, and after meeting Laurence and his two children in an effort to provide closure, she starts to slowly integrate herself into their lives. As she grows closer to the Kytes, it starts affecting other aspects of her own life - she is taken more seriously in professional circles, she is motivated her to improve her appearance, her confidence slowly builds.

I've seen "unreliable narrator" tossed around in various reviews, and I must say that I didn't really see that in this novel. Frances is lonely, yes, and cleverly manipulative, but she is credible - she is always fully aware of what she's doing and none of her narrative is ever disproved. Instead, her voice is almost cautious - she knows she doesn't belong and it's always in the back of her mind that others might fully realize this. She's uncertain how long her good fortune will last, and her fascination with the Kytes and with Alys is tinged with guilt and fear. It goes without saying that she is a fascinating character - she has an inherent understanding of human nature (probably due to years and years of careful, constant observations) and is able to twist it to her will by the end of the story.

This is a very quiet book - the definition of a slow burn - but it's extremely well-written, absorbing and subtly sinister. It's certainly not a typical psychological thriller, and I'm not sure I would even classify it as one - the "action" is fairly sparse and there are no in-your-face twists, but that doesn't mean there aren't surprising turns in the plot. I would especially recommend it if you enjoyed any of the above mentioned novels (apparently it also bears similarities to Gillespie and I, which I'm pleased to hear as I own that one and have been meaning to read it this year!)

Maya Panika says

Wow. Just... *Wow*. It's rare - very rare indeed - that a book that comes with as many superlatives as this lives up to the hype, but Alys Always absolutely does and more. The writing is superb, the style flinty and sparse yet richly descriptive.

The story follows the Machiavellian scheming of Frances Thorpe, an underachieving, under-noticed sub editor on the literary pages of a floundering broadsheet - a description which does no justice at all to this remarkable novel: a first-person story told in a voice that is entirely believable and recognisable, hesitant but sure, scheming and underhand, but always with a hint of guilt, a tint of fear, that she might, after all, be found out; that she just might not get away with it. The uncertainty adds terrific piquancy to the tale and keeps those pages turning. I've rarely read anything quite so compulsive. I read it in two afternoons. I missed two lunches and countless coffees for it. I could hardly bear to put it down at all.

Jane says

What a wonderful book: it is clever, subtle, clear and compelling.

It begins with Frances, driving back to her home in London on Sunday evening after spending the weekend with her parents.

She sees an overturned car in the road. And so she stops, she calls the emergency services, and then she goes to speak to the woman in the car, to reassure her that help is on the way.

The woman is trapped, and she is injured, but she is calm and lucid. Alys waits with her until help arrives and then she continues on her journey home.

Back to her life in London where she lives a quiet, unremarkable life. Frances is a sub-editor, working for the literary editor of a national newspaper; she wanted to be in that world but she wanted more than she had. Quite understandably.

A few days after the accident Frances learned that the woman in the car had died. The police ask her if she will visit the woman's family, to tell them what she knew of what had happened, to help them understand. She is reluctant, but she knows that it is the right thing to do.

She was the last person to speak to Alys Kyte.

Alys: wife of Lawrence Kyte, the celebrated, prize-winning author.

She visits an elegant Highgate townhouse, and she sees the world where she has always wanted to live. She takes care to offer words of comfort to Laurence, the grieving widower. And to say the right things to his son, Teddy and his daughter, Polly.

Polly needed a friend in London, near her drama school, and she saw that Frances could fill that role; and Frances saw how much she could gain from becoming a friend of the family.

She worked hard to gain her entrée into their world. And she accepted the career advancement that came her way when the company she was keeping was noticed. In time it seemed natural and right, that she had earned her place in the inner circle of literary London.

Bust she also had to be careful. Because what would the answers be in anyone ever asked who she was, where she had come from?

Intriguing questions, and I was pulled this way and that as I wondered what would happen. At times I felt such empathy with Frances, and I could always understand what drove her. But there were times when I instinctively felt that she should pull away, step back. And she didn't.

This is a story that brings a clever mixture of influences together beautifully. It could be Patricia Highsmith writing with Barbara Pym. Or Anita Brookner writing with Barbara Vine perhaps.

But no, it's Harriet Lane, and she has created something that is entirely her own. She writes with both elegance and clarity, she balances suspense with acute observation, and she understands her characters, their relationships, the worlds they move in absolutely perfectly.

She held me from the beginning to the very end.

That ending was perfect: unexpected, thought-provoking, and exactly right.

I am left thinking about everything that happened, and what might have happened after the end of the final chapter.

And wondering what Harriet Lane might write next ...

Deborah Markus says

The short review: Hmm.

The details: I have no idea how I feel about this book.

It's beautifully written. It's compelling. I looked forward to the reading time I could steal from a busy day, and was more irritable than usual when my family interrupted me.

But when I got to the end – and it was a good, decisive ending, in contrast to that of Lane's second novel, *Her* - I felt vaguely dissatisfied. I don't know if that's the book's fault or my own.

I think it must be mine. I'm a terrible shallow reader who likes to be able to empathize, or at least sympathize, with the protagonist. If the protagonist isn't available for that sort of chore, I'd like a friend or family member to pick up the slack. Heck, a distant cousin who flies in for a quick visit would do.

No one of the sort showed up for this novel. I was left all alone in a cold, colorless story that feels as elegant and empty as an unused champagne glass.

The story starts off eerily enough. Frances Thorpe is driving home one night from a visit to her parents when she comes across a car that's crashed. The driver is trapped inside the wreckage, but she manages to make herself heard through the closed windows. Frances calls for help on her cell phone, then waits with the woman, offering what comfort she can via small talk and sympathy.

Before the ambulance can get there, the woman stops talking and starts making pained, frightened noises. By the time help arrives, she's dead.

That would be a life-changing event for anyone. But then, in life-changer #2, the family of the dead woman – a husband and two grown children – ask to meet the young woman who was with their Alys in her last moments and who heard her last words.

And that's where things take a strange turn, indeed.

This book reads like a mystery or suspense novel; but the mystery is why Frances has so little emotional reaction to anything that's happened, and the suspense involves wondering what on earth she's up to.

I don't want to say much because the surprise is very odd – not so much an event as a facet of her personality. I will say that while Frances is by no definition evil, she reminds me a little of *Othello's* villain, Iago. He was described by Coleridge as "a motiveless malignity" – a seemingly nice guy who destroys lives for no reason.

Frances isn't that sort of destructive force; but it's startling to learn that this woman who seems to spend her entire life drifting aimlessly is exactly the opposite of motiveless.

Carla says

After reading the editorial reviews for *Alys, Always* I was expecting a taut and riveting read. While it has some intense moments-especially the opening chapter-*Alys, Always* never quite lives up to its billing. The story is about Frances Thorpe, a young editorial assistant (Frances refers to herself as a "sub editor-an invisible production drone") in the books department at a London magazine, the *Questioner*. One evening while driving in the London countryside, Frances comes across a serious car crash. Although Frances cannot see anyone in the overturned car, she hears the voice of a woman and Frances talks to her, staying until help arrives. The next day the police contact Frances to review her statement about what happened at the crash site, and Frances learns that the woman in the car, Alys Kyte, has died. Although initially denying Alys's family's request to meet with her, Frances changes her mind once she learns that Alys was the wife of celebrated London novelist Laurence Kyte. At her meeting with the Kyte's, Frances embellishes the conversation she had with Alys in her dying moments ("Tell them I love them" Frances falsely claims were Alys's last words) and begins a friendship with Alys's college-aged daughter Polly. Frances uses Polly's grief over her mother's death to ingratiate herself with Laurence and his dazzling world of literary high society-people Frances has previously only known through print. Frances is clearly obsessed with Laurence and his lifestyle, and her behavior becomes increasingly erratic in a quest to get closer to Laurence. Polly's older brother Teddy eventually confronts Frances with the "inconsistencies" between the statement Frances gave to the police after the crash and what she told the Kyte's at their initial meeting, but Frances tells Teddy she only added Alys's "Tell them I love them" words to comfort her family. At this point, *Alys, Always* could become the psychological thriller it was meant to be, but the story loses momentum as Frances and Laurence become romantically involved. None of the characters have the emotional depth needed to carry

the story, and the ending is disappointing. Author Harriet Lane's debut novel is sort of a "Fatal Attraction Lite," but it had the potential to be much more.

Blair says

Alys, Always, the first novel by Harriet Lane, has received rather a lot of press, and all of it - without exception, as far as I'm aware - has been positive. Given that the author is a former journalist who has written for most of the British broadsheets, this isn't so surprising. But a few things about the book grabbed my attention anyway: the beautiful cover, the promise of a story set amidst the London literary scene, the comparisons to Zoe Heller's masterful *Notes On a Scandal*.

Frances Thorpe is a struggling journalist who is driving home one night when she sees an overturned car by the side of the road. She rushes to help, and has a short conversation with the woman trapped inside the car, who then lapses into unconsciousness just as an ambulance arrives. Later, Frances learns that the woman, Alys Kyte, died just minutes later. When Frances is asked to visit the Kyte family to talk about Alys's last words, her natural impulse is to do what's necessary and escape as quickly as possible - until she realises that Alys was the wife of a celebrated, Booker-winning author, Laurence Kyte. Partly by chance and partly by design, she starts an unconventional friendship with the Kytes' 19-year-old daughter Polly, and soon sees an opportunity to ingratiate herself with the family and to better herself, both personally and professionally.

It's only since I've begun writing this review that I've recognised the similarities between this book and one of my very favourite reads from last year - *Gillespie and I* by Jane Harris. Much like *Gillespie and I*'s Harriet Baxter, Frances is a single woman with a rather empty life - though her age is never actually revealed, it's implied that she is in her mid-thirties, and she spends her days toiling away as a sub-editor on a left-of-centre newspaper, the *Questioner*. She has few friends, an awkward and distant relationship with her parents, and is often treated as a dogsbody by her boss. However, she is not simply a lonely person craving any sort of human interaction: faced with potential interest from a scruffily dressed, but nevertheless attractive and available, male colleague at a party in his shabby flat, she baulks and flees. Rather, Frances fancies herself as something of a social climber, and as she begins to realise how far her association with the Kytes could take her, her determination and ambition grow - along with her deviousness.

At numerous points, Frances is asked: 'where did you come from?' The words are spoken both as an accusation and an endearment. This book - Frances's story - is the answer to that question. With the pace and lucidity of a thriller, Lane shows us how quickly Frances is seduced by the Kytes' lifestyle - not just the privilege and status, the adoring acolytes and luxurious homes, but how *easy* and expected it all is. The simplest observations of the family's everyday routines illustrate with great clarity how unassumingly blessed they are, and this is a state Frances becomes increasingly desperate to achieve. The reader, too, is beguiled by this coveted lifestyle: at so many points I just wanted to jump into the book, to live inside it. In this it reminded me of another great, and similarly evocative, read from last year - *The Poison Tree* by Erin Kelly. But where Kelly's novel was ruined by a daft, schlocky ending, Lane's boasts a conclusion that is dark, delicious, and absolutely perfect. Frances is a brilliant creation, by turns sympathetic and terrifying, but always so believable that you forget you're reading fiction.

Engrossing to the point of being absolutely addictive, this is one of those books that makes you feel you've fallen into a different world: after I'd devoured it within less than 24 hours, I looked up from it dazed and a little bit lost. In this review, I have defined it mainly through comparisons to other books, but it is a wonderful novel in its own right. I have a penchant for debut fiction, and am often drawn to first novels, but

even so, this really is a stunning effort. I loved the story, loved the style and found myself thoroughly under the spell of Frances and the Kyte family. Harriet Lane, you have a fan for life!

Andrew says

Charlotte Black drops back to join me. She's one of those rare women who looks as pulled together off duty as she does in more formal circumstances. I have to admire her slim-fitting, dark cotton dress and flat, plain sandals and the few adroit bits of silver. "Are you having a good holiday?" she asks as we pause to let two teenagers drag a dinghy over the road, up towards a boatshed.

"Oh, yes. I didn't really have any plans, and then Polly asked me down, and I've never quite got around to leaving," I say with a laugh.

"Yes, it seems you've really become part of the family." Something in her voice reminds me, as if I needed reminding, that I shouldn't underestimate Charlotte Black. "What an unusual way to get to know the Kytes."

Harriet Lane's debut novel, *Alys, Always* opens with a young woman, Frances Thorpe, driving on an icy road in northern England, when she happens upon the aftermath of a single-car accident. The driver, Alys Kyte, wife of the famous novelist Laurence Kyte, has only moments to live. It is Frances, lonely assistant editor for the *Questioner's* books section, who is present for Alys's final words, which unexpectedly provide her with an entryway into the lives of the London book industry's upper crust—and through them, their faults, their secrets, and their infidelities.

Alys, Always is a deceptively narrow story. Alys's death, the event which sets in motion the entire narrative, is treated as if it is nothing more than a minor detail—a plot device to place Frances in the sights of people she at first seems to dislike or feel impatient towards, but later comes to respect and, to some uncertain degree, love.

I say uncertain because Frances's character is distractingly uneven. From her somewhat humble beginnings as a journalistic benchwarmer, Frances's internal monologue is, at first, bitter and full of spite towards her contemporaries; there is an air of frustration about her as she simultaneously decries the perceived ambitions and posturing of others, yet willfully adopts such tactics herself when given the opportunity to rub shoulders with Alys's family—to get to know them on a more intimate level. What begins as a supposed desire to give closure to her family following Alys's death quickly spirals into a strange obsession with this semi-elite gathering of spoiled-by-life adults.

Alys, Always reads at times like the soft-spoken British cousin to Stephen King's *Misery*. There's a bit of Annie Wilkes in Frances Thorpe (minus the punishing, murderous intent). The speed at which Frances transitions from comforting presence and minor family friend to a talisman-stealing, pseudo-replacement for Alys is alarming and without satisfactory set-up; though Frances's ambitions are referenced in the book's twilight, never do her actions feel so deliberate, so calculated as to be attributed to ambition or upward career mobility. Instead, she regrettably comes across as a lost soul who has managed to fumble her way into a position of some influence, with a family that appears, on the outside, to need her and value what she has to say more than her own family, or her employers.

With its titular character little more than a footnote to an unfortunately two-dimensional story, *Alys, Always* is unable to rise beyond its rather straightforward premise. Frances Thorpe is an unpredictable lead, vacillating between timid, friendly, manipulative, and desperate, with little to no reason given for the changes her character sees. *Alys, Always* feels less like a novel and more like a draft for a screenplay, its characters static and incomplete.

Claire says

This book is exceptional. "*Alys, Always*" kept me guessing right up until the end. Frances Thorpe, subeditor for the books section, lives an unexceptional life and is easy to overlook. Then Frances witnesses the final moments of Alys Kyte, wife of a celebrated novelist, and everything changes.

Frances is asked to meet with the grieving family, and is drawn into their world. Alys and Laurence's daughter Polly, a glamorous yet flaky drama student, is Frances' way of getting a foot in the door - by acting as a stabilising force in Polly's life, Frances begins her quest to become a part of the family and sets her cap at Laurence.

As the novel is narrated in the first person, initially it seems as though there is nothing out of the ordinary about Frances' quest to get closer to the Kytes. At times Frances' actions seem almost sinister (i.e. the theft of Alys' shawl), and at times normal. This narrative technique is particularly effective, as it renders Frances believable.

Why Frances puts so much energy into her pursuit of Laurence - all the while making it seem effortless - is also dealt with effectively. He is a talented, charismatic older man; Frances is attracted to him and feels a spark of electricity when they come into contact. Furthermore, the more developed her relationship with the Kyte family becomes, the more Frances advances in literary circles. She is taken seriously on a professional level, and her relationship with Laurence adds an element of mystery to her private life.

Other than the elegance of the prose, what impressed me most was how well Frances plays her hand. She is a fascinating character, and her judgments are always intriguing. Perhaps this book is a how-to manual on playing the long game - though maybe I'm overlooking Frances' tenuous relationship with the truth. As to whether Frances was slightly creepy or normal, there is no definitive answer. This book is not one that you will forget in a hurry.
