



The Observations

Jane Harris

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A powerful story of secrets and suspicions, hidden histories and mysterious disappearances set in Victorian Scotland.

Scotland, 1863. In an attempt to escape her not-so-innocent past in Glasgow, Bessy Buckley—a wide-eyed and feisty young Irish girl—takes a job as a maid in a big house outside Edinburgh working for the beautiful Arabella—the "missus." Bessy lacks the necessary scullery skills for her new position, but as she finds out, it is her ability to read and write that makes her such a desirable property. Bessy is intrigued by her new employer but puzzled by her increasingly strange requests and her insistence that Bessy keep a journal of her mundane chores and most intimate thoughts. And it seems that the missus has a few secrets of her own, including her near- obsessive affection for Nora, a former maid who died in mysterious circumstances.

Giving in to her curiosity, Bessy makes an infuriating discovery and, out of jealousy, concocts a childish prank that backfires and threatens to jeopardize all that she has come to hold dear. Yet even when caught up in a tangle of madness, ghosts, sex, and lies, she remains devoted to Arabella. But who is really responsible for what happened to her predecessor Nora? As her past threatens to catch up with her and raise the stakes even further, Bessy begins to realize that she has not quite landed on her feet.

The Observations is a brilliantly original, endlessly intriguing story of one woman's journey from a difficult past into an even more disturbing present, narrated by one of the most vividly imagined heroines in recent fiction. This powerful story of secrets and suspicions, hidden histories and mysterious disappearances is at once compelling and heart-warming, showing the redemptive power of loyalty and friendship. A hugely assured and darkly funny debut, The Observations is certain to establish Jane Harris as a significant new literary talent.

The Observations Details

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Author : Jane Harris

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From Reader Review The Observations for online ebook

Barb says

"I was born Irish. But I'm more of the Scottish persuasion now." Bessy Buckley narrates with a direct, honest and often bawdily descriptive slang. She used to be something other than a maid as well. Quick on her feet and not one to give herself away unless absolutely necessary, she is starved for love and attention.

She meets Mrs. Arabella Reid, who is a bit of an intellectual and is at work on an interesting project. When the "Missus" learns that Bessy can read and write she decides to hire her as the 'in and out' girl at her estate, Castle Haivers. Bessy is eager to please her new mistress even when her requests are rather unusual. Mrs. Reid gives Bessy a journal and asks her to record her daily activities. When Bessy's discovers Arabella's true feelings for her she decides to play an elaborate joke on her mistress. The joke has unfortunate and unforeseeable consequences.

The story has a rich and evolving quality to it, Bessy's narration changes and matures as she does. She describes the countryside of "Scratchland" and the propriety of the Victorian era with an eye for detail. I enjoyed listening to her story and was sorry when it ended.

Jane Harris has been compared to Sarah Waters and I have to say there is certainly a similar flavor about their work. I will be looking for Jane Harris' next novel.

Laura says

Although at times this was creepy, atmospheric and even funny, with nice character arcs for two main characters, it needed to be cut by at least 30%. For a book over 400 pp long, it wasn't really worth the time. At around 300 pp., it would've been a four star book, at least.

Lucrezia says

Non sono convinta, non sono convinta proprio per niente.

Essenzialmente per metà romanzo non succede nulla, nell'altra metà le cose vanno a finire in maniera così scontata da non aspettarselo...

La ricostruzione storica è decente, ma da qui a paragonarlo a Faber...

Spero che "I Gillespie" sia davvero molto meglio come dicono.

Diane S ? says

Set in the mid 1800's in a rather dilapidated Scottish manor, related in a Gothic style one would expect this to be a very dark novel. Thanks, however, to the wonderfully humorous character Bessie the darkness has great periods of light. Her quirky saying and phrases are a joy to read. This is a slow to build novel and after 400 pgs. I was expecting a big reveal. That didn't happen and I was a little disappointed but glad I read anyway.

Kristina says

I loved this book so much that I'm actually sad that I no longer have it to read. THAT'S a book that deserves 5 stars for that reason alone. This story is so well written; the character of Bessy and her "voice" is flawless. It's hilarious, creepy, dark, mysterious. I could go on forever.

Tara Chevrestt says

I LOVED Bessy, the narrator of this novel. What a character! Very gutsy, very outspoken, honest, and to top it all off, she has a sense of humor. The novel itself had an entertaining, mysterious plot. What seems to be irrelevant and unrelated happenings actually ends up being tied together in a bow by the end of the book. It did, however, have a rough beginning. The narration is shoddy and difficult to read at first. The reason is explained at the end and the reader actually realizes how very appropriate it is. In order for the novel to read more like this girl's journal, the writing is much as people spoke back then. But as the girl matures and improves writing wise, the novel blossoms, the texts changes, and becomes easier to read. So those that are put off by the beginning language, do keep going! Bessy's thoughts and observations as she plods thru a difficult life of a maid in the Victorian times will have you laughing out loud as well as shaking your head in sympathy.

Paul Bryant says

The Modern Victorian Novel : a Scrummy dish for All the Family

Ingredients

½ cup Wilkie Collins
3 oz finely ground Sarah Waters
2 oz Crimson Petals and Whites
1 lunatic asylum
1 Railway disaster or if not available, a Coal Mine Explosion will do
3 or 4 Drunks and Uncouth Persons
A fresh bunch of Scullery Maids and Servants
1 Master
1 Mistress
1 Rambling Manse
2 Crowds
A large bag of hard luck
5 teaspoons of child prostitution
2 oz grated Freudianism
3 lb. meaningful dreams
Undercurrents of Lesbianism to taste
As much droll slang as you can stomach

Toss together in a big manuscript and hope it all comes right in the end

This was a bit of a shaggy dog story, or shaggy maid story, where you think every part of this novel is pinched from somewhere else but heck, it's still fun, and anyway, tell me something that's completely original in this day and age, right? This is post post modernism or wherever we're at, beyond irony, beyond plagiarism, if it feels good do it. So this was fun fun fun till her daddy took the t-bird away. Which is to say that the problem was not in the telling of the tale, that was rollicking, if tonally precarious to the point of no longer being slightly credible, but who was counting; the problem was that the tale spluttered and melted and came apart, the denouement could not match the buildup, a shame really. With a whizbang plot (instead of a lot of peculiar circumstances gesturing vaguely towards a plot) this would have been a corker but without one it's all a bit mere. It was a big bag of Cadbury's Caramel Nibbles – O my God did I just eat the whole bag?? And you're left feeling a bit guilty but you got to admit you liked it while you were doing it.

POSTSCRIPT

My favourite line from this novel:

Even a wet wasp will crawl towards jam

Kate Forsyth says

The Observations is such a delightful read! It tells the story of a girl named Bessy who takes a job as a maid-of-all-work in a gloomy country house in Scotland in the mid 1860s.

Bessy has a past she would rather forget, and so is grateful for the refuge her mistress Arabella offers her. However, she soon comes to realise that not is all as it seems in the house, and that an earlier maid has died in rather mysterious circumstances.

With naïve optimism, Bessie sets out to find out what happened, and finds herself getting rather more than she bargained for.

The true pleasure of the book is Bessy's voice – gutsy, wry, and vulnerable – and the clever way Jane Harris weaves her narrative threads together.

Ova Incekaraoglu says

This was quite an interesting read. The story started terribly exciting and promising but the second half was a bit disappointing. Maybe because I expected a surprise ending, found it a bit predictable. Still a great,

gripping book but do not read with the expectation of a twist ending!

If you liked this you might also like The Vanishing by Sophia Tobin

Silvana (Por detrás das Palavras) says

Esta leitura acompanhou durante duas semanas. Infelizmente o tempo já anda escasso desde há muitos meses, caso contrário, esta leitura teria avançado mais rapidamente devido à forma intrigante com que a história é conduzida.

Opinião completa aqui:

<http://por-detrás-das-palavras.blogspot.com>...

Gary says

1863 and Irish teenager Bessy Buckley, an intelligent, streetwise yet tender hearted girl, leaves Glasgow where she has had an abusive past, forced into prostitution at ten years of age by her mother, to make a better life for herself and comes into the employ of Arabella Reid in a beautiful mansion named Castle Haivers near Edinburgh. She develops an infatuation with her glamorous but unstable mistress and is all to eager to please Arabella, who performs strange experiments on her. But this changes when she discovers a journal of her mistress entitled 'Observations' on the 'habits of the domestic class' in which Arabella says some uncomplimentary things about young Bessy and also reveals her infatuation for a previous maid named Nora who died in mysterious circumstances. Hurt and incensed Bessy decides to play a childish prank to get revenge, but this sets in motion a series of weird and dangerous occurrences and many twists and turns. Humorous, witty, at times sad and at others chilling, but always impossible to put down and always a magnificent read - this novel has it all. I fell in love with Bessy and it was her wonderful, witty, tart, pert, adorable, and warm hearted character, with a wonderful turn of phrase - such gems as 'pigs pizzle' 'I couldn't give a fleas fart' and 'Jesus Murphy' This makes sure the book was never dull. As you come to know Bessy you will want to follow her adventure to the end. A cast of Dickensian characters which Bessy interacts with makes this one of the best debut novels on the 2000s. This is a wonderful read and cannot be recommended enough.

Blair says

Judging by the plentiful positive reviews quoted inside and outside this book, the whole world seems to think Bessy Buckley is a brilliant creation, and I couldn't help but fall for the character too. The colloquialisms grated a little at first, but I was soon drawn in by the lively, spirited narrative. Bessy's own 'observations' are often laugh-out-loud funny, and her rebellious yet vulnerable - and altogether very human - voice is what brings the story to life and makes this a great read. I didn't find the plot especially strong - I thought the secrets behind Arabella's strange behaviour were revealed far too early - and the conclusion was a little disappointing, but this is a perfect example of how a striking protagonist and an entertaining narrative can transform a mediocre idea into an original, authentic and highly enjoyable story.

Saleh MoonWalker says

Onvan : The Observations - Nevisande : Jane Harris - ISBN : 670037737 - ISBN13 : 9780670037735 - Dar 406 Safhe - Saal e Chap : 2006

Joseph says

3.5*

Scotland, 1863. An Irish young woman with a dubious past is unexpectedly taken on as a maid at a Scottish estate. The lady of the house has haunting secrets of her own, secrets whose consequences could lead to tragedy...

Sounds like the typical “Neo-Victorian” novel which has become so popular since the likes of Sarah Waters and Michel Faber burst on the scene. And in my ways it is. But unlike lesser imitations of Waters, Jane Harris' The Observations has a defining characteristic which singles it out in a crowded market – the fresh, streetwise, slangy narrative voice of its feisty protagonist “Bessy”. By turns comic and touching, the strength of this novel is the way in which Bessy's tale takes us in.

It is not the plot which does the trick – although it has enough twists and turns to keep one hooked, it is ultimately no match for, say, Waters' Fingersmith or the original sensation novels of Wilkie Collins or Mary Elizabeth Braddon. However, in her remarkable storyteller Bessy, Harris has created one of the more likeable and memorable characters of recent fiction.

Rebecca says

Well. The voice of the narrator was terrific, and kept me going for about 75 pages. Gradually, however, the plot simply began to wane, and the heft of the unread pages began to drrrrrrrrrrrrrag, until I skipped ahead to read the last 30 and called it done. I guess I'd have to say that the book simply lacks the oomph to drive the plot and/or the reader (aka ME) through 400 pages. Bessy/Daisy, sharp and funny as she is, deserves a sharp and clear plot with the same energy she possesses. 100 pages edited out might've kept me going.

Dagio_maya says

1863- Terra del Diavolo-

Bessy si sta allontanando da Glasgow con un unico obiettivo: arrivare ad Edinmburgo e mettersi a servizio al castello reale. Strada facendo, però, vede un cartello che indica il «Castello di Haivers» e l'istinto la porta a fare una sosta che diventerà una fermata.

Cosa riserva il futuro alla quindicenne Bessy?

Cosa nasconde il suo passato?

Intrigante e coinvolgente.

skein says

A charming book (if you don't mind 19-century vulgar slang. Naturally, I love vintage slang.) & a very enjoyable one - it was actually *fun to read*. Engrossing in parts.

The narrator's voice entralls from the beginning. It held *me* down for the first 300 pages or so before I was tired (mystery! mystery! mystery!) - I give most of the credit to the *strong* characterization of Bessy. In contrast, some of the other characters felt under-written - especially Arabella - which was a shame.

The ghost! mystery! aspect was so strong, it rather overwhelmed the *actual* plot. I understand that the two plots are supposed to work together, in tandem, and gradually separate. It didn't *quite* work.

That said ... I'm looking forward to Harris' next offering. She's going to one to watch.

Christina says

“The Observations” is an off-the-beaten-path type of novel, Jane Harris created a well written novel that still haunts me, as I finished the last page. Ms. Harris formulates a tale of mystery, psychological twister, a chilling-haunting, and murder that is interwoven with historical details and the great psychological pursuit and devices of its day. There are times, Ms. Harris, lets your imaginations fill in the details of the story- which makes you wanted her to fill it in herself because your mind was taking on disturbing thoughts of ‘imagining’ what happened. This is only one aspect how this book brings the dark- shadowing of the events within this story and how you let your own mind not be too reliable in piecing together what is going on. The synopsis of this story is a girl named Bessy is trying to flee from a past, which you find out throughout the read was one of horrible means. She is merely a child who was forced to grow up quickly. She stumbles upon a home that is mistaken as a Castle, because it is referred to a Castle but all it is a once fashionable home that was been neglected and is falling down around the owners on an estate (which is an early indicator of the relationship of the characters involved) that holds farm animals. Bessy is taken as a house-maid for the ‘missus’ and there that is where the story gets fascinating.....

An enjoyable read but it is not your typical formulated read and it was not made for light reading. This book is not for everyone. However, you like to read something that is not mainstream, not written in generic formulated plot fashion, and then I would encourage you to go to your local library and seek out this book. Though, this book not being your typical Wal-Mart shelve variety novel...the local library may not house it. But it would not hurt to try.

Michael says

Review from Badelynge

The heroine, and faithful scribe, of this tale is one Bessy Buckley, or so she introduces herself. She's a young Irish girl, running away from a mother who has ruthlessly exploited her from an early age. She arrives at a

ramshackle mansion, somewhere near Edinburgh, where she is taken on as a housemaid by the mistress of the house, Arabella Reid. The 'missus' as she calls her soon has young Bessy confused and bewildered by a succession of seemingly random and mostly pointless requests. And every night she must write an account of the day's events along with her inner thoughts. Despite all this Bessy develops a fierce loyalty for her mistress and then she finds out, by the chance discovery of Arabella's in-progress book 'The Observations', what the object of her devotions is really up to and tellingly what her opinions of Bessy are.

What happens next is best left for the story to tell, but it is a fascinating read that weaves Bessy's dark past, the mysterious fate of her predecessor, Arabella's paragon of all house maids, Nora, and Arabella's own secrets into a startlingly engaging narrative mystery. Bessy is a wonderful character, who colours her tale with the most vivid and sometimes lurid slang and colloquialisms. I'm often put off by such inclusions, though in this case they are pretty much essential to the style and don't distract at all. Though being a native of northern England, where many of the expressions are still in common use or fondly remembered from use by my Grandparents, I could be more immune from irritation than the average reader. Bessy is also not averse to casting ridicule on the people she recounts by exaggerating or over annotating their speech patterns and accents. The more she despises them the more extreme the exaggeration. I think it's no accident that Hector, the sex obsessed Highlander, gets the brunt of it.

The Observations is an excellent débüt novel. I've read the latest book by Jane Harris, 'Gillespie and I', which appeared some 5 years after 'The Observations' - so if you enjoyed this book I'd recommend you look it up with all due dispatch.

Morgannah Mayfair says

"Vic Lit" anyone? This term pertains to contemporary novels which set out to mimic Victorian Literature. While for the most part I usually find this genre to be lackluster and boring, *The Observations* by Jane Harris is a wonderful tale that contains both substance and story.

Set in 1863, our tale is narrated by Bessy Buckley, a 15-year-old on the run from a dubious past in Glasgow. She drifts into a job as maid to Arabella Reid, the mistress of an estate outside Edinburgh. Bessy is requested to perform a series of bewildering tasks, but quickly becomes entranced by the eccentric and engaging Arabella. There is a slightly sapphic connection between the two although any mention of such would not be lady like.

Since I am indeed a lady I will not go on about the finer workings of the story but suffice to say this would not be Vic Lit if one of our beloved main characters did not become feeble minded and loose touch with reality. While Arabella's mind wanders, more is revealed of Bessy's past. Claiming to have been a housekeeper, dear Bessy is no such thing and has been a very very bad girl as of late. She has done things that no upstanding lady would dare mention here.

The novel is highly episodic, and intentionally sensationalist, thick with the guttering candles and careening shadows of gothic parody. Events are conveyed in a raucous, cursing first-person narrative that give life to Bessy and thus the entire story.
