



Act of God

Jill Ciment

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From the author of Heroic Measures ("Smart and funny and completely surprising...I loved every page,"—Ann Patchett), a contemporary noir-novel that starts out a comedy-of-errors and turns darker at every hairpin turn—about a lethal form of mold spreading throughout New York City, about the townhouse in which it's first discovered, and the people living in it whose lives are suddenly upended.

It's the summer of 2015; Brooklyn. The city is sweltering from another record-breaking heat wave, this one accompanied by biblical rains. Edith, recently retired legal librarian and her identical twin sister, Kat, a feckless romantic who's mistaken her own eccentricity for originality, discover something ominous in their hall closet: it seems to be phosphorescent; it's a mushroom...and it's sprouting from their wall.

Upstairs, their landlady, Vida Cebu, a Shakespearian actress far more famous for her TV commercials for Ziberax (the first female sexual enhancement pill) than for her stage work, discovers that a petite Russian girl, a runaway au pair, has been secretly living in her guest room closet. When the police arrest the intruder, they find a second mushroom, also glowing, under the intruder's bedding. Soon the HAZ-MAT squad arrives and the four women are forced to evacuate the contaminated row house with only the clothes on their backs.

As the mold infestation spreads from row house to high-rise, and frightened, bewildered New Yorkers wait out this plague (is it an *Act of God*?) on their city and property, the four women become caught up in a centrifugal nightmare.

Part horror story, part screwball comedy, Jill Ciment's brilliant suspense novel looks at what happens when our lives—so seemingly set and ordered, yet so precariously balanced—break down in the wake of calamity. A novel, as well, about love (familial and profound) and how it can appear from the most unlikely circumstances.

Act of God Details

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Author : Jill Ciment

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From Reader Review Act of God for online ebook

Danger says

I really like the way this was written, the characterizations were all excellent, and the tone of it (both charming and dark) really worked for me. Just...the last third of the book didn't quite work as well as the first two-thirds, but the novel is short enough that even the focal shift and (somewhat) lack of resolution don't derail it. Will be checking out more from this author.

Jill says

Jill Ciment is the kind of writer who can grab you from the very first sentence (in this case: "The twins suspected it was alive, but they weren't exactly sure if it were plant or animal." I loved her book *The Tattoo Artist* and devoured her next book, *Heroic Measures*. So I couldn't wait to get my hands on her newest one, *Act of God*.

In ways, *Act of God* has a lot in common with *Heroic Measures*. In each, New Yorkers become panicked due to an outside danger (a gasoline tanker truck that become stuck in the Midtown Tunnel in *Heroic Measures*, a toxic phosphorescent mushroom infestation in *Act of God*). Both books also contain shifting points of views and characters who are striving to make sense of the craziness that has suddenly taken over their lives. These quirky, eccentric characters – a hallmark of Jill Ciment's – vaguely call to mind Anne Tyler's loveable protagonists.

This book opens with twins Edith and Kat, two women in their mid-60s who are rooming in the Victorian home of their landlady, Vida Cebu, a would-be Shakespearean actress who has become notorious for her role in a female libido drug commercial. To add to the chaos, a young morality-challenged Russian girl is flopping in Vida's guest bedroom without her knowledge. When the mushroom is discovered, HAZMAT is called and all their lives are thrown into complete upheaval.

As each of them muddles their way through, themes begin to emerge. In Vida's case, "She felt oddly free, as if she'd escaped. Had the house been that much of a responsibility? Why didn't she feel worse?" And in another snapshot, one of the twins is trying hard to salvage the letters of her deceased mother, a one-time grande dame of advice columnists. Gradually, the twists of their lives echo the plaintive cries of the old letters, "Will I find love again? Why did she lie to me? Am I lovable?"

The slim novel raises some big questions: Who deserves forgiveness? When do we take responsibility and when do we blithely proclaim that a natural tragedy is an "act of God?" How do we build a sense of community at a time when we feel all alone? The book is compelling and page-turning – I read it in one sitting. But I couldn't help but feel as if Jill Ciment was recycling some of the themes of her previous novel. Still, I can think of far worse ways to spend a few hours than in the company of these flawed but wonderful characters.

Brian says

Did you ever go to a diner and see a piece of cake that you just have to try? It looks like it has rich frosting, maybe a soft but crumbly cake underneath. You bite into it and say "Hmm, this is pretty good.." but as you eat it, you realize that something is slightly off about it but you can't quite put your finger on it. Is the frosting too sweet? Is the cake slightly stale? Is the flavor just one note?

This sums up my feelings for this particular book. I read it in about 2 nights. After reading it the first night, I went on Goodreads and saw that it had less than stellar overall reviews. I was puzzled by this because I was about 100 pages in and thought that it was pretty good...

The book is about four different people, a pair of twins, an actress and a Russian immigrant who all deal with a mold infestation. The book is part drama, part very light horror. As the city gets covered by this mold (sort of), our characters are forced to make new homes, some more unorthodox than others. My issues with this book:

1) It was way way too short. There wasn't enough time to develop the characters or give us a sense of who they were.

2) The mold problem didn't seem as bad as it should have. We got the sense that the city was slowly being taken over by it, but it seemed very muted. A hotel is about to be torn apart because of this mold, but it just seems to be taken in a very light and airy manner. I never got the sense of a sheer panic from any of the characters.

3) In such a short book, there are a bunch of side characters who are introduced, which doesn't work well due to the extremely brief length of the story. I wanted more about our main four than stuff about the super of the building or the cat lady (who I did enjoy)

Ultimately, I thought this book held a great deal of promise, but at the end of it, I was left wishing there was a whole lot more. The stuff I read I did enjoy, but it left me feeling empty inside...

Anna says

Another novel discovered while browsing in the library. In this case, what attracted me was the theme of mould in rented flats. (I have way too many mould anecdotes from past houseshares.) I found the concept and characters appealing and the farcical elements very funny. The plot, however, was oddly jerky. Events escalated very quickly and then suddenly ground to a halt. It was rather disconcerting and undermined my enjoyment rather. One development in particular really put me off. (view spoiler) In short, a flawed little novel that makes some quite neat points about the Kafka-esque trap of homelessness. And I did like that all the main characters were female, even though I didn't always approve of what happened to them.

Kasa Cotugno says

Jill Ciment has a way of creating characters that are probably closer to real New Yorkers than those that inhabit most fictional stories about NY. In the two contemporary books of hers that I've read, I've met people whose lives are thrown into disarray by situations that could only arise in that city with that reaction. In this

case, phosphorescent mushrooms provide the catalyst that catapults several households into chaos, one in particular. With a pair of 60-ish twins who are attempting to save their mother's legacy, that mother having been a sort of Doctor Ruth who, after passing, has left her entire oeuvre for the Smithsonian. Then there is an actress who can't find work in Shakespearean plays she longs for because she's gained sideways fame from an ad for a female Viagra. As with Ciment's other books, there is a supernumerary cast that have truncated story arcs of their own. I can't wait for the next installment in Ciment's examination of humans of New York.

karen says

Heroic Measures is one of my all-time favorite books, so i was thrilled when this little slip of a book landed on my desk.

it's nothing at all like h.m., and i didn't like it nearly as much, but like the iridescent mushrooms that spur this story along, my appreciation of it was one of those creeper kinds that grows larger after some time has passed.

it's kind of a quiet book - it's funny and sad and brisk and a kind of fabulist-noir story whose real heart-kaboom lies in its characters and the way they are changed by what is, admittedly, a kooky series of events. on paper, it seems like it could be silly - edith and kat glasser are twins in their sixties who have led wildly different lives; kat has been out living her life with wild irresponsible abandon while edith is the steadfast retired legal librarian, keeper of secrets as well as an archived collection of their mother's letters from her successful career as a beloved advice columnist. these letters are not the only things that are threatened when a phosphorescent fungus starts to invade their brooklyn townhouse, the spread of which results in their being evacuated by a hazmat team along with their distracted actress landlady vida cebu, and the 18-year-old russian girl who has been living in vida's closet, completely unnoticed.

it sounds like it should be a farce, but the story starts to tread a darker path than i'd expected, as the women struggle to find home and safety, forgiveness and second chances as the fungus spreads farther and wider, displacing more people. ciment has that same quality that millhauser has - it's a writing that manages to make the everyday human concerns somehow simultaneously more and less familiar by virtue of setting them in this just slightly off-kilter context. there's nothing here that we haven't experienced ourselves: loss, love, guilt, longing, rootlessness, purposelessness, financial and career panic, redemption - and yet they seem to hold more fascination here than they would in a more conventional story - they shine a little more brightly.

it's a lovely little book, and i think that after my second skim-read before writing this review, i felt a little more warmly towards it than i did on my first go-round. which might come down to my notoriously numb feeling-parts when reading, because this is one of those books in which having fully-functioning emotions will help a lot, particularly towards the end.

it's a 3.5, nearing the 4-star range.

i do recommend it, and i hope you will also check out Heroic Measures.

Kate Vane says

Act of God is the story of four very different women who are confronted with a 'supermold' growing in a house in Brooklyn.

Edith, retired law librarian, is affectionately exasperated by Kat, her deadbeat twin sister. Vida, the owner of the house, is an actor who has found fortune and notoriety in an advert for a sex enhancement pill. Ashley is a defiant but scared Siberian squatter, hiding out in Vida's apartment.

When the glittering, glowing fungus is identified by the authorities, they are all forced to leave the house and their lives are thrown into chaos.

The tone of the book is so light and witty you don't immediately realise how dark it is. I loved the strong, spiky characters, their sharp observations, their humour and resilience.

The book asks questions about responsibility and chance, about who we are when we're stripped of what we own, about how relationships can both nurture and harm (particularly if you're spreading sparkly spores).

I felt the plot did drift a little towards the end but it was such an engaging read I didn't mind too much.

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I received a free copy of this book from the publisher via Netgalley.

Steve Kemple says

I really wanted to like it. Phosphorescent mushrooms taking over New York? Awesome! Well, not so awesome, it turns out. It basically turned into a predictable morality tale about love and forgiveness. Which are fine things, but...ugh. This was like one step removed from a rejected Lifetime movie.

However, by far the worst thing about this novel was the author's offensive, culturally ignorant portrayal of a major character who is a Russian immigrant. Novels have the capability of engendering empathy by letting the reader live in someone else's head for a while. The novelist has a responsibility to be able to translate human-ness across cultural gaps, which means building on the essential things people have in common while being sensitive, or at least knowledgeable, of the experience of being a member of the "other" culture. In this case, the character might as well have been saying "in Mother Russia we drink vodka" over and over again. That actually would have been an improvement.

Nisha Feik says

Good story, characters were a bit cartoonish, maybe deliberately to reflect the bizarre plot.

Whittney Hooks says

The only reason this book gets two full stars is because of the awesome audio book narrator. Otherwise, it was terrible.

Michael says

To Call *Act of God* a bizarre read would be a total understatement and to be honest, I am struggling on how to describe it. The focus being on four very different women who are faced with losing everything thanks to an occurrence of nightmarish proportions. This comes in the form of a glowing and growing mushroom-like fungus. Twins Edith and Kat are the first to discover this phosphorescent mushrooms growing in the apartment they share and after trying to inform the blocks owner, eccentric actress Vida Cebu, are forced to leave.

Little do they know that Vida has also had to vacate after discovering a Russian au pair squatting in her guest room and the same mysterious fungus in her upstairs living quarters. All four women will end up on the street joining thousand made homeless by the outbreak and after losing everything will find themselves inevitably connected. What follows is one of survival as they rely upon friends, instinct and themselves.

This book has a tragic humor about it that can easily distract from some very dark themes. How we as humans cope when we lose everything we hold dear and our resilience in the face of it is paramount. Questions about the element of chance and responsibility and the dynamics of relationships also go hand in hand. I was somewhat disappointed with the whole mushroom outbreak thing, What I hoped would be evil organism hell bent on world domination in the end, unfortunately, turned into something far more mundane. Overall though, this is an engaging and well-written story about humanity.

Ruthann says

It was ok but I kept waiting for something to happen. I thought maybe the mold would take over the city or something. A bit disappointing.

Rayroy says

Creative story but little else. A Russian character spoke in stereotypical Russian accent. And it's main character a greedy , failed actress realtor in Brooklyn, Yawn. The twin sisters in their late 60's use Blackberris, The failed actress an iPhone, YouTube?, I don't like name dropping of smart-phones or apps in my literature,OMG it's annoying. Also the minimalist approach doesn't work if the prose is stale, though calling the prose stale is harsh perhaps, still good prose is hard and furthermore prose is something that registers differently with each reader. This reader wasn't feeling it. You can tweet that.

Holly says

What an odd little novel. I thought I liked Jill Ciment up to now (or I liked *Heroic Measures*), but I'm not sure if this was any good. Was it a farce? Meant to be light and humorous or morally thoughtful and unsettling? Was it some sort of cli-fi with toxic mold? The "killer mold" that sets the plot rolling was rumored to have been caused by a combination of Hurricane Sandy and the Greenpoint oil spill, but that's not

discussed extensively.

I will say the black mold and mushrooms-growing-in-the-rental-house subject hit rather close to home. I lived through that little nightmare myself some fourteen months ago. I know too much about the insurance policies and the "acts of God" clauses and finding oneself temporarily homeless with a lot of questions your landlord doesn't want to answer. So I was particularly critical of Ciment's handling of the matters. Why did the tenants not worry about finances, getting compensated for living in hotels or receiving their rent back? Why no "mold remediation" instead of burning the dwelling down? The treatment of this subject became campy and silly, sort of over-the-top with panicky reactions and absurdities. Okay. So it's a humorous novel!

Lastly, I don't keep track nor give much thought to reading an equal balance of books by male and female authors. But if I were to count then I want extra points for this novel: it's full of women characters, old and young, with only a couple men in supporting roles. Two elderly twin sisters, a beautiful Russian immigrant (with some of the best scenes in the novel), a crazy cat lady, and an actress named "Vida" (whose name brought the author-count statistics to mind).

Lori says

Listened 4/20/15 - 4/22/15

3 Stars - Recommended to fans of dark comedies parading as science fiction and raspy-voiced narrators

Length: approx 5 1/2 hours

Publisher: Random House Audio

Narrator: Barbara Rosenblat

Released: March 2015

It's summertime, 2015, and the city is in the grips of a nasty heatwave. Retired twin sisters Kat, who has lived her entire life evading responsibility, and Edith, an ex-librarian who has squirreled away letters from their mother's old advice column in the hopes of having them published one day, live together in a row house beneath Vida, an uppity actress and negligent landlady. Kat and Edith have been leaving messages for Vida regarding an odd smell in their apartment for weeks and now, well, they seem to have stumbled upon an odd, glowing mushroom growing out of their closet wall.

Turns out Vida has one in her apartment too, which she uncovered in the back of her own storage closet, along with a surprised young Russian runaway who was apparently squatting there unnoticed for months.

Hazmat is called in and the four women are forced to evacuate the property with nothing but the clothes they are wearing (and the letters Edith manages to smuggle out). The Super-Mold is unlike anything the city has seen before and it begins to spread at an incredibly rapid pace. Vida's insurance company calls it an "Act of God" and the remainder of the book is spent following the now-homeless and bereft women as they move through the city, dazed and confused, and leaving a trail of sparkling spores in their wake.

The audio book was a pleasure to listen to. Admittedly, Rosenblat's voice took a bit of getting used to - she's got this very throaty, raspy smokers-voice but I felt it actually fit the main characters' personalities quite well. It's strange, I can still hear her voice in my head as I'm recalling parts of the book for this review.

I've come to the conclusion that Jill Ciment has one strange sense of humor. Her characters were just eccentric enough, their situation just bizarre enough, to categorize it as dark comedy, though she teased the hell out of us in the beginning there. I see some people have the novel shelved as science fiction over at Goodreads but, sadly, there was nothing other-worldly to be found. I do admit that, as I listened to the book, there was a big part of me that was hoping the Super-Mold would've had extraterrestrial origins, or that the Russian girl would turn out to be not quite human. Maybe that's a residual effect of having read and loved Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach Trilogy? But I really felt as though that was the direction Ciment was initially taking us. There came a point in the audio where I just finally accepted that the book really was as straight forward as it seemed - sometimes mother nature just gets one over on us - and that there wasn't going to be some big mama-mushroom monster revealed to be amassing itself beneath the city, preparing to launch a war against humankind in a John Wyndham, Day of the Triffids sort of way.

Bummer that, too. That would have been pretty badass. Picture it, phosphorescent mushrooms weeble-wobbling down the streets, sparkling up the world with their deadly glowing spores, what a glorious apocalypse that would have been!
