



Sight

Jessie Greengrass

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The extraordinary first novel from the author of the prizewinning *An Account of the Decline of the Great Auk, According to One Who Saw It*.

It seemed, at times, an act of profound selfishness, to have a child so that I might become a parent; but selfish, too, to have a child and stay the same, or not to have one - unless the only honest choice would have been to try to become this kinder version of myself without the need to bring another into it . . .

Sight is about X-rays, psychoanalysis, and the origins of modern surgery. It is about being a parent, and being a child. Fiercely intelligent, brilliantly written and suffused with something close to forgiveness, it is a novel about how we see others and how we imagine ourselves.

Sight Details

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Author : Jessie Greengrass

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From Reader Review Sight for online ebook

Anni says

I'm sure every new parent underestimates the overwhelming life-changing effects and the personal growth needed to cope, which is probably just as well when you eventually realise that your beloved offspring may be your hostage to fortune.

Childbirth, death, unconditional love and parental fears are the themes here, interwoven with stories of the insights brought about by scientific and medical research. Greengrass explores the physiological and psychological effects of parenthood, particularly from the female point of view – as a mother, daughter or grand-daughter, facing the challenges and responsibilities of bringing a new life into the world.

Meike says

Like my GR friends Neil and Sarah, I thought I would give this book 2 stars while reading it, but then ended up rating it higher, and I guess the reason for this is that the core idea of the text is good, but the execution is severely lacking. Greengrass plays with the concepts of sight and insight, and how the desire to see the world and to understand it are intertwined.

Her protagonist is a woman who is expecting her second child, and a lot of the story is her contemplating and trying to understand her roles as a mother, a partner, a daughter and a granddaughter. Which brings us to the first issue I had with the book: Her thoughts and observations are pretty unoriginal and also overblown in a sense that many cases of stating-the-obvious are presented as cutting-edge ideas, which makes for an annoying reading experience.

What is new and original about the text though is how Greengrass creates a montage in which she juxtaposes her protagonist's musings with other people's quest to gain new perspectives and insights while balancing family relations, namely:

- The Brothers Lumière: Auguste and Louis revolutionized the concept of seeing by inventing the cinematograph, which means that they were the first filmmakers in history;
- Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen and his wife Bertha: Röntgen of course invented the X-ray, he literally looked inside people;
- Sigmund Freud and his daughter Anna: The inventor of psychoanalysis wanted to look inside his patient's minds;
- John Hunter and his brother William: They were pioneers as surgeons and anatomists, so...you get the idea.

Unfortunately, the montage technique is very clumsy, with Greengrass simply interspersing the text with huge paragraphs about the inventors and scientists named above - it's not exactly meeting the Clemens Meyer-elegance-standard for postmodern extravaganza, if you know what I mean. Plus the author is guilty of another literary crime: She is explaining her concept to us - in the text. We're not stupid, Greengrass, we get it, especially as you are really, really hammering it home.

Good basic idea, but for me, this was not an enjoyable book.

Roman Clodia says

This is a book which manages to be both raw and honest yet also a bit dreary; elegant but contrived. Essentially an interior monologue about pregnancy and motherhood with some inserted diversions into other parent/children relationships (e.g. Sigmund and Anna Freud), it is moving in places (the narrator's changing bond with her ageing and increasingly fragile mother) but also too long. It had out-stayed its welcome with me by the end of just 200 pages.

That said, I really loved the writing: Greengrass is not just an elegant stylist but writes with linguistic freshness, and has a lovely texture to her prose. Themes of borders, boundaries, surfaces and insides resonate throughout, shifting between the material and figurative, the medical and mental.

I've seen comparisons drawn with Rachel Cusk but where I was captivated by Cusk's 'Outline' recently, this book left me feeling manipulated. Intelligent, for sure, but something about this left me feeling jarred and ruffled. Still, with prose this accomplished, I might well try this author again on different subject matter.

Elyse Walters says

I knew I wanted to read Jessie Greengrass's debut novel from the moment I first read about it.

SHORTLISTED FOR THE WOMAN'S PRIZE FOR FICTION 2018.

It took two weeks for my hardcopy to arrive in the mail after I ordered it.

I felt very drawn to this novel — very reflective- very literary- very much a woman's book. I did plenty of my own reflection as well.

"Sight" is about being a parent and a child...birth and death.

The subject of mother's - women - children - birth - and death - sits with me deeper this time of year - [May & June] - than any other.

My own birthday is at the end of May. My mother's was the first week in June. My older sister's - the end of June (our tripod female birthday's growing up without a man in our house).....and my mother died in June.

May is also Mother's Day. My two daughters call May 'mommy month'. The way I remember the busy years of parenting our daughters - was May was so busy with their activities- theatre performances- swim meets- etc. - I quietly felt loss in the shuffle. I knew I had a birthday & Mother's Day in May... but some of those years were 'kids month' in my eyes.

Yesterday the movie "Tully" opened with Charlie Theron. It tore me up! A movie about motherhood. The performance by Theron was so real - so raw - I was aching with tears. I admit to being extra sensitive these days too. But - every mother could relate to the exhaustion....if nothing else.

May is suppose to be my 'happy' month. My daughters will be home visiting soon.

Beautiful grown adults here to enjoy our relationships - no longer do I need to rush around from the theater to the swimming pool. It really is 'mommy month' now.

ButI'm looking at life in ways these days I never did before - and it's somewhat frightening. STILL GRATEFUL....just a little scared....life has been throwing a lot of challenges all at once.

I knew it would take effort to go to the movie yesterday. For a girl who loves to hike as much as reading - I'm struggling with walking to my car from the front door of my house these days without pain. I woke up from my last 'nose repair' surgery two weeks ago with some nerve problem coming from my spin. I'm in physical therapy almost daily with a scheduled MRI this week but as I was struggling walking slow to the movie — I notice every person in wheel chairs or people with walkers with 'fear'....and sadness. I already have a bionic ankle which will need replacement again in about 7-10 more years. Walking is high on my list of important.

Since I turned 65 last May... it's been one thing after another...(the shit kept hitting the fan with medical/ physical things)....

skin cancer (loss 1/2 of a nose: 4 surgeries).....osteoporosis diagnosisnow struggling with walking?and for a little over 2 months now,I live with painful ulcer sores in the inside of my mouth. It's an autoimmune disease called Lichen Planus. I'm still trying to get it to go away. No success yet - none of the medications have worked.

So.....why share all this? Sometimes a book - a movie - or both - lands in our hands when we need it most. The question I'm sitting with is... what am I to take from this book? From the movie yesterday. I tie them both together for some reason....

It's MOTHER'SFEMALE MONTH...This book is a powerful reminder.

HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY to all my female friends here.....(even if not a mother).... as all women are mothers.

A couple more thoughtsthen I'll focus directly on the novel "SIGHT".

1...I wondered how I would have felt about this book if I read it when my mother was alive - and before giving birth. I think it would have been incredibly beneficial.

2...I'd love my daughters to read this book....(not yet)....but when they are in another cycle of their lives. (they don't have children - nor do they plan to)....but I believe every woman goes through the 'mothering stage' at one time - or another - in some form in their lives.

Now about *Sight*.....

It's not a book for everyone. But I do think almost any reader who appreciates literary fiction at all - would 'at least' be incredibly impressed and moved by Jessie Greengrass's stunning writing. Hard to believe this is a debut.

The narrator's recollections are of her mother — her mother's death —and of her grandmother who was a psychoanalyst.

Intertwined the narrator shares major medical discoveries: the X-Ray by Wilhelm Rontgen...Sigmund Freud's work...and science about the anatomy of pregnant bodies.

I found the science history of the book -- interesting - but less absorbing than when the narrator was more personal grappling with grief and or worry....more directly connected with her own life.

She and Johannes definitely wanted to have a baby but she was sincerely worried....would she be a good mother? Fear hit her hard while caring for her terminally ill mother.

The recollection shortly after her mother died not only moved me -but I reflected on a similar experience with my own mother. My mom died alone. She was found dead on her kitchen floor. I have replayed her moments before her death a million times.

Buta specific memory came to me when we were almost happy together.AND SO WAS OUR NARRATOR WITH HER MOTHER:

“At last, even with me always present, the work of caring for my mother at home became too much. One morning, struggling from her bed to the bathroom, pushing a walking frame in front of her, she stumbled and fell, sitting down heavily on the carpet. She was unhurt but no longer had the strength to stand back up and although for a while I tried to right her, tugging her this way and that, bringing various items of furniture to use as props or levers, I was unable to lift her weight. I had to call an ambulance because she wasn’t a priority we sat for hours, side-by-side on the bedroom floor, waiting for it to arrive. I made us lunch, sandwiches to eat on our knees, the sort I have picnic she had made me sometimes as a child on rainy Saturdays, and the fragile cast of this memory brought a kind of complicity between us, a resurgence of the intimacy that we had once possessed, so that for a while it was almost as though we were happy”.

As for thoughts of becoming a mother....

“Sometimes, when I saw a woman in a café pick up a baby from a pram, I felt a weight in my own arms, a heaviness, where nothing was, and the force of my longing for a child was such that I had to turn away but still I could only feel how impossible it was that I should ever manage such complicated love”.

And just before giving birth....

“ I find that when I think of my mother now it is not have that version of herself which she became when ill, nor of how was when, throughout my childhood, compromise forced her into unspectacular unhappiness, but rather it is at this woman whom I never knew, whose face bends down to meet her child’s, whose hands I close, who smiles. I feel such tenderness towards her. She must have known so little, then, of what it is to have a child, but had to learn it all from scratch, and did — as I have done, and all the rest of us, learning from the moment we are born how to be one single version of ourselves with all the losses that entails. I am so used to thinking of my mother is someone who is complete, her life concluded, that to imagine her at this moment, caught during those few weeks when everything was, briefly and for both of us, possibility, is to feel her startlingly close, her death unwound. She is not shut and done with but persists, and I am glad”.

Really beautifultender...emotional & heartfeltpoignant.....

Jonathan Pool says

Sight is the first novel by Jessie Greengrass. I read this by virtue of its long listing for the Baileys Womens Prize for Literature, 2018.

It has a really good chance of winning (deservedly in my opinion).

The pregnant narrator is a deep thinker, and a serious, reflective person. She is searching out her own life’s meaning, and her anticipation of her unborn child’s coming existence is primarily contemplative of the new child’s needs.

“This is what we all do, this striving to make sense”(103).

This, though, is not a book that becomes too narrowly focused or introspective. This is a consequence of Jessie Greengrass’s excellent insertion of three historical figures whose own search for truth and enlightenment mirrors that of our pregnant narrator.

The book starts with Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen and the invention of the X Ray.

Best known of the three figures is Sigmund Freud

“This analysis is harder than any other”(102)

Then there’s the trio of, anatomists William Hunter and John Hunter, and the artist Jan Van Rymsdyk.

Each of these true stories is fascinating in its own right, and the “striving to make sense” illuminates our highly, understandably, sensitive mother-to-be.

This is an excellent book and highly recommended.

I had the chance to attend Jessie Greengrass in conversation with John Mitchinson at a small gathering at Waterstones in London. An evening which provided some great background on the book. Understanding Greengrass’s own influences and ambition, and the chance to google the clues she gave added to my already high regard for *Sight*.

Authors who influenced the writing *Sight*

W. G. Sebald In particular ***The Rings of Saturn***. Sebald’s first-person narrative is the account by a nameless narrator on a walking tour of Suffolk. In addition to describing the places he sees and people he encounters, various episodes of history and literature are referenced.

Unlike Sebald, though, Greengrass said that she is NOT the narrator!!

John Donne Sermons Donne was writing when Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral in 1626. Greengrass aspires to the ‘old style’ essay writing

Knausgaard & David Foster Wallace Greengrass admires both writers, and for Foster Wallace particularly she praises the beauty and honesty of his short story/essay writing about himself. Greengrass stressed that hers is not a non-fiction book, and that she’s not good enough to write such a book.

Melanie Kline *Sight* was originally going to be about Melanie Kline, the Austrian-British psychoanalyst who devised novel therapeutic techniques for children that influenced child psychology and contemporary psychoanalysis. However the book wouldn’t develop properly, and the eventual storyline about pregnancy was the last thing to emerge.

Two of the first children Kline analysed were her son and daughter. One child died, the other wouldn’t speak to her mother in adulthood.

The arrival of Sigmund Freud and his psychoanalyst daughter, Anna Freud, in London in 1938, came into conflict with Klein’s work.

While the Freudian and analytical aspects of mother child relationship are central to *Sight*, Greengrass couldn’t make Kline story work sufficiently to become the book’s pivot.

Structure of the book Three trimesters; three historical perspectives. Very neat? Jessie Greengrass thought so, and then went on to say she first had this drawn to attention at a reading, but that it was accidental. She said how interesting it was, though, to have clever and intelligent interpretations of the book coming out which strengthened the writers original messages.

Academic philosophy

Jessie Greengrass studied Philosophy at university (rather than English, the expected training ground for writers). Philosophy is avowedly a major influence on her writing style, and particularly the precision that the discipline brings. Greengrass needed to find a very precise form of words (Mitchener, in conversation was examining the absence of plot and the importance of mood and setting).

Philosophy also demands rigorous enquiry, and in her acknowledgements Greengrass talks about her hours in London’s Wellcome library.

c.18th Philosophy connected the writer and subject, a strong and key theme, both for mother and baby, and also for the three historical examples cited, and reflected upon, by Greengrass. Hence Freud's "This analysis is harder than any other"(102).

The title was the subject of numerous emails between publisher and author! "On Sight"; "Imaging"; "In Despair" were all considered and rejected. Greengrass gave the impression that the eventual title chosen wasn't especially meaningful!

Greengrass also said she's not very good at naming her characters.

Anticipating the future, Greengrass, who is due to give birth soon, does not expect to write a book in the same style.

She doesn't write dialogue, and she's not interested in plot (thus ironically given her love of Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie). She is interested in people's inner thought processes rather than description from the outside.

I, for one, look forward to her future work, having given my first five star review of the year to Sight.

Paul Fulcher says

'My memory of her, what remained, was like a memory of distance or the cold, intangible, unsymbolic, not sight nor sound, not touch, not taste, and my attempts at a description of it floundered like the description of music does in words, conveying nothing of its sound or substance.'

Jessie Greengrass's debut novel, Sight, comes compared to WG Sebald (a debt she acknowledges) and Rachel Cusk, a comparison made by those who both liked and disliked the book.

And I suspect that may be the issue: given Sebald is perhaps my favourite author of the last 30 years, and I read this immediately after finishing Cusk's magnificent Outline/Transit/Kudos trilogy, my expectations were very high, and in practice I found this a significant disappointment.

I appreciated Greengrass's focus on interior thought rather than exterior action (Thomas Bernhard is the master of this - alongside Sebald, one of my favourite authors), but again having read this shortly after Anita Brookner's Look At Me, this has been done much much better before.

Greengrass, it must be said writes magnificent sentences, but they often felt like phrases for their own sake. Why suffer from 'morning sickness' when one can experience *'the constant queasy ostinato over which rose exhaustion's disharmonious cadence, a progression paused before the point of resolution, aching forwards.'*

As MisterHobgoblin said in his review (<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>) "the language is convoluted and when the reader unpicks the complexity to expose the meaning, there isn't always very much to find."

The beautiful sentences worked well when discussing the historic figures (although even here the part about Sigmund and Anna Freud felt much weaker than the two surrounding stories, perhaps because it is more well trodden territory). For example, this description of when Röntgen took an x-ray picture of his wife's hand, which has been recorded in posterity as the first x-ray.

'Röntgen, who for weeks had been alone in his newly understood world, had sought with this image Bertha's admittance to it, the making of the picture a gesture of both initiation and affection: the tenderness of her bones made visible to them both, confirmation of the life which had formed such extraordinary structures; but these things are a matter of interpretation. To Bertha, whose hands were solid, whose body unitary, who had not doubted those things that constituted her—her skin, her thoughts; the single object that was flesh housing mind—nor sought to understand them, it had the chilly, soily smell of tombs. —It is, she said—like seeing my own death—and she turned away, and refused to look again.'

But for the more personal parts of the novel, it diminished the power rendering the experience dull: I felt the emotions had been fitted to the sentence, rather than the opposite. The comparison to the rawer more visceral prose of authors like Patty Yumi Cottrell, Gwendoline Riley or Ariana Harwicz is not to Sight's credit. Indeed, for a short (200 page) novel, it took me longer than normal to read, as I had to put it down frequently to avoid falling asleep.

For a more generous take see the reviews from Gumble's Yard (<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>) and Jonathan (<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>)

But for me, disappointing. 2.5 stars rounded down to 2 due to the high expectations I had.

Some quotes and thoughts:

'He liked to repeat experiments others had already performed, not so much to check the veracity of their results as because this careful reconstruction, the slow rhythm of test and repeat, brought with it that particular quality of understanding which is got only by having seen for oneself: a grasp which is something like illumination, the reframing of proposition to fact so that the truth of it is felt, immediate.'

....

Röntgen appears to have been baffled by [a] journalist's interest, his persistent attempts to force Röntgen towards an account, not of the work that he had done, its procedures and its progress, but of the way it had felt to do it. What, the journalist asked, did you think when you saw the faint glow across the laboratory? To which Röntgen answered, 'I didn't think; I investigated—'

Two excellent sentences explaining Röntgen's approach to science, and which fits well with the approach of surgeon and anatomist John Hunter in the third part of the novel: *'In adulthood this dislike of academic study became a principle of sorts—he distrusted that which might be learned from books, believing that it was always better to see for oneself with truth not proved until it had been performed.'*

Staring at the ceiling, the exposed skin of my abdomen filling the silence like an unacknowledged solecism, I wondered if this leaching of character or compassion on her part was intentional – if it were done in case, needing either later, she might find that she had squandered them on the ordinary amongst us, we whose unborn children leaped and flipped about, indistinguishable from each other; or if it were itself an act of compassion, pre-emptive and organised: a way of sparing those for whom this day would be a shattering, insulating them from her sudden change of tone, a tightening of the skin about her mouth or eyes, the lurch from friendliness to intercession.

The sonographer in the pre-natal ultrasound department - here the sentence stays just the right side of the line, but as the narrator turns her attention on herself ...

'It would be dreadful— meaning all the time that I knew what our decision would be but that I didn't know

what degree of guilt or distress I might feel, all outcomes seeming to me so far entirely hypothetical, and I was worried I would feel nothing for this entity which was as yet more idea than child, which was in its own presumptive wellness experienced as the expectation of an unimaginably different future and as a combination of sickness and obligation, a requirement to regard my choices as circumscribed.'

The anxiety of the first-time mother awaiting her fetal development ultrasound scan: lovely writing but the power is completely lost in the unnecessary words.

'Revelation pended, the veil between myself and understanding was in a constant state of almost-rending, and I thought I could see shadows through it, the outlines of an as-yet uncomprehended truth, until all at once the mania crested and what came out of it, in place of elucidation, was agony, my head pinned in a vice, my body hanging limp below it, a disarticulated sack of bones and blood around which my limbs curled, stiff and liable to snap.'

No. me neither.

'Each evening when the library shut I walked home, an hour's steady, thoughtless progress through the evening streets with their clots of drinkers outside pubs, their newspaper sellers and fruit stalls, skirting north through the decaying Georgian streets above King's Cross towards the gentility of Islington's garden squares and then down onto the towpath to walk along the canal into Hackney.'

Words that could have been lifted from Brookner's *Look At Me*, a comparison that doesn't flatter *Sight*.

'Sometimes, when in the woods I watch my daughter with indefatigable hopefulness attempt to climb a tree whose first branch is five times her own height above the earth, tiny fingers thrust into crevasses or knots, red wellingtons scrabbling on curved bark for purchase, I feel myself winded by the desire to promise a protection that I cannot give; and if, then, I thought there was a way that I could make her life better than the ordinary –if I thought that I could make it smoother, softer, less fraught with the sudden, troubled revelation that hidden motivation brings, or with the half-rotted-through desire for what will come to haunt or hurt her –if I could give her clarity, self-knowledge, sight –and if, telling her the secret now to stop her searching for it later, I could leave happiness to her like a legacy –then I would; and if afterwards it turned out that she wasn't happy after all then how would it be possible to say it was my fault?'

Perhaps the source of the novel's title.

Jaclyn Crupi says

A trusted reader has called it that *SIGHT* will win this year's Booker Prize and I think he could be right. This beautiful, lyrical, poetic, stylized novel is a meditation on motherhood and personhood. It reminded me of Rachel Cusk, Deborah Levy, Siri Hustvedt, Catherine Lacey and Gwendoline Riley; all writers I love. Greengrass interweaves stories of scientific developments and psychoanalysis into her novel about a woman trying to decide if she wants to have children and then trying to be a mother in the absence of her own mother and the shadow of her grandmother. #sight

Shawn Mooney says

There is some beautiful writing here, particularly the meditations on grief. The whole thing fails, though, because mostly what's here is pedantic, dense prose: more academic than fictional. It's not a novel, IMHO—it's an overly long, rather pretentious essay; while I cannot recommend it, some other great readers out there certainly do.

(I have much, much more to say in my BookTube review: <https://youtu.be/dDAWi0JLMFc>)

Eric Anderson says

The prospect of having children can be exciting, but also terrifying. Luckily, it's something I've never strongly desired so I'm satisfied in the role of uncle, godfather and sometimes babysitter to friends' children. However, some reasons I'd be frightened of having children (beyond a total ignorance of how to care for them) is a dread of making some irreparable mistake and also the inability of protecting them from experiencing pain at some point. Jessie Greengrass describes this as “the overwhelming fear of fucking up that having children brings, the awareness of the impossibility of not causing hurt like falling into endless water”. Her debut novel “Sight” is a reflection on the process of having children and why her narrator is particularly self conscious about the continuation of her lineage. But, more than that, it's a remarkably poignant meditation on the internal and external levels of our mental and physical reality. The narrator is a young woman who cared for her mother during her terminal illness and now faces the prospect of becoming a mother herself. She sifts through her personal past and considers the lives of disparate individuals such as Sigmund & (his daughter) Anna Freud, Wilhelm Röntgen (the first man who produced and published scientific studies of X-rays) and scientist/surgeon John Hunter. In doing so, she embarks on a journey into how she might allow her child to see the multiple layers of life and thus pass on an abiding sense of happiness.

Read my full review of Sight by Jessie Greengrass on LonesomeReader

Kamil says

I believe this might be the first book that made me start comprehending what it means to be a parent. Engrossing, smart and beautify written novel.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

This novel, shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction, is a braided novel about motherhood and scientific discovery (x-rays, psychoanalysis, and surgery.) The writing style reminds me of Motherhood by Sheila Heti, where the narrator feels like the author and I had to keep reminding myself that it is fiction. I had to push through it at times but ultimately was glad I did as it had some resonance with my own recent experiences, especially those of having a parent die in hospice and what you think about during and after, what the truth of that experience is.

"I wanted a child fiercely but couldn't imagine myself pregnant, or a mother, seeing only how I was now or how I thought I was: singular, centreless, afraid. I was terrified of the irrevocability of birth and what came after it, how the raising of a child, that unduckable responsibility, might turn each of my actions into weighted accidents, moulding another life without intention into unpropitious shapes, and caught between these two poles - my desire, my fear...."

"This is where grief is found, in these suddenly unfilled cracks, these responsibilities - minute, habitual - which have lain elsewhere for years and which, having failed amongst grief's greater broil to be reapportioned, are overlooked in favour of the more dramatic, until even the ordinary starts to crumble."

"Love, for my mother, was not distinct from action."

"Through those last long months, though, the physical intimacy which her illness demanded of us left no space for any more metaphorical form of contact - the present was too onerous to allow any intrusion by the past, and the work of being kind, against the urge to hurt which comes as vulnerability's unwelcome companion, left no energy for confession." (this is so spot on I was speechless when I read it)

"I find myself wondering if my mother felt as I do... the overwhelming fear of fucking up that having children brings, the awareness of the impossibility of not causing hurt like falling into endless water, and with it the attendant agonising understanding that what success looks like is being left behind - but what is the alternative? Only the unthinkable perfection of a preserved present. Our lives are possibility reduced to rough particularity by contact, touch, and out of it the specificity of each of us comes, so that to ask if we might have been better otherwise is to wish ourselves undone."

"I felt the power of it and do still: how simple things would be if only I could know myself or to others."

I received an eARC from Random House through Edelweiss. This book came out 21 August 2018.

Jennifer says

Hmmm. Lots of conflicting feelings about this one, but the more I've thought about this book, the less I've liked it. Video review here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtlVv...>

Britta Böhler says

Not my kind of book. I can see why some readers love it, but the self-absorbed first person narrator (unnamed, twenty-something woman being pregnant with her second child) just bored me. The best parts were the sections exploring the lives of historical figures like Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen, Henry Thomson and John Hunter.

Rachel says

Sight is an ambitious and introspective novel in which our unnamed narrator recounts her experience with new motherhood, while at the same time coming to terms with the death of her own mother and

grandmother. To say that I have conflicting feelings about this novel would be an understatement; it's like every singular element of this novel draws two completely contradictory reactions from me. I both admire it and find it insufferable at the exact same time.

Let's start with the prose, which is what everyone is going to be talking about when they talk about *Sight*, and rightfully so. It feels like Jessie Greengrass's sentences go on for days, each one carefully crafted to show very evident technical skill. Some of these sentences are striking, with poignant, meaningful commentary on the human condition:

"I want only what I think we all must want: to come off as better than I ought, more generous, more sure--kinder than I know myself to be; but I want also to be known, to be counted and to be excused. I can't have both."

Some, not so much:

"All morning, caught up in the business of appointments, I had forgotten to feel sick, but now it returned, the constant queasy ostinato over which rose exhaustion's disharmonious cadence, a progression paused before the point of resolution, aching forwards."

I mean, 'I had morning sickness' would have sufficed, but okay.

After a while of immersing yourself in this prose, what first feels lush and fresh begins to feel methodical and calculated - even the variances of syntax have a very distinct rhythm to them. At times I would get lulled into it, and at others, it would feel like it was written by a particularly verbose robot. The interesting thing about *Sight* is that while it endeavors to reflect on the human condition, it does so in such a measured way it's almost as if it's devoid of all humanity. This is a book and a character that wants to be able to reduce the human experience to a series of elements which can be scientifically categorized, made evident by the heavy integration of medical history into the narrative.

That brings me to my next point, which is that *Sight* is very light on the narrative. This entire book is driven by the narrator's fixation on her relationship with her mother, on whether or not she wants to have a child, on her ownership of her own body - and while I'd take character-driven novels over plot-driven novels any day, I hesitate to even call this character-driven, because by the end of it, we still know hardly anything about this person. For all the navel-gazing in this novel, we don't even know where this character works. Does she even have a job? No, this isn't the point, but it also makes it harder to fully immerse yourself in this character's world.

There's another line, ***"but the price of sight is wonder's diminishment"*** which I think not only sums up this character's introspective journey, but also, for me sort of characterizes the book as a whole. This is a book which dives into themes which I ordinarily find interesting - how well can we truly know other people, how well can we know ourselves - and examines them so thoroughly, it leaves almost no room for the reader to actively engage. I feel like this is one of those novels which attempts to ask questions of its readers without being particularly interested in their answers, because you can find all of the answers in its pages. I mean, maybe that's not even a bad thing. It just doesn't get me particularly excited.

I admire the technical skill that went into this novel, but it ultimately didn't leave as strong of an impression on me as I had hoped it would. But there's a lot of thoughtful commentary in these pages, and it's worth a read if you like your books heavy on the philosophy.

Thank you to Netgalley, Hogarth Press, and Jessie Greengrass for the advanced copy provided in exchange for an honest review.

Gumble's Yard says

Update. Nine months on from my original review my (not particularly hard to make) prediction of a Wellcome prize longlisting for this brilliant book has come true.

I had no understanding of the drive to exhume that now turns my quiet moments into imperfect acts of reminiscence: how it is to feel that one must note each detail of one's thoughts in case that thing should pass unseen which might otherwise provide the key, laying out the shadows of the bones which rib and arch and hold the whole together

It strikes me as extraordinary, now, that we should be so hidden from ourselves, our bodies and our minds so inaccessible, in such large part uncharted: but there is a thrill to it, too: that same mixture of terror and quickening which confronts us where underneath the sea the light gives out and unnamed creatures float

I read this book as part of its longlisting for the 2018 Women's Prize, although I had been aware of the book from some early reviews and had expected it to make the longlist. I am not surprised to see it shortlisted.

"Sight" is the author's debut novel, after a critically acclaimed book of short stories.

I can see and can understand that this book may not be to the taste of many readers – but I feel that what others do not like about the book is what I most enjoyed.

A FT review by Sam Leith described it (rather condescendingly in my view) as *a certain sort of literary novel in which not much happens and with musings ... expressed in a mannered register with very little resemblance to the way the average 21st-century person talks*. In contrast I do not expect literary fiction to be plot heavy, my fellow Goodreads reviewer Paul has often remarked of the "spoiler" tag on Goodreads; that by definition a book which has a plot which can be spoiled is already flawed. Further I do not read literature to reproduce "say, like how the average girl, kind of talks?"

From unfavourable or neutral Goodreads reviewers, the book has drawn comparison both to Rachel Cusk and to W.G. Sebald: whereas I regarded these comparisons as something that attracted me to the book and in both cases can see the links: perhaps a double aspect to the link in both cases, of Cusk her book on motherhood and her annihilated perspective style, of Sebald his weaving of historical fact into fiction and in a reference to East Anglian beaches), albeit the novel has style of its own.

The book's premise is simple – our unnamed narrator, married to Johannes and with a young daughter is pregnant with their second child. She reflects on her relationships with her mother, grandmother and

daughters (born and unborn), and on her past and future roles herself as daughter, granddaughter and mother and on the transition between these relationships as well as that from child to adolescence to adulthood.

The narrator is a voracious reader, and after the death of her mother, before marrying, she spends time in the Wellcome library (as did the author herself writing the book), searching through the medicine books there in the hope she *might find the fact which would make sense of my grown unhappiness, allowing me to peel back the obscurant layers of myself and lay bare at last the solid structure underneath*, her quest described as *I sought among so many books a way to understand myself by analogy, a pattern recognised in other lives which might be drawn across my own to give it shape and, given shape, to give it impetus, direction*

As an aside – the Wellcome Trust sponsors one of the most intriguing book prizes in the UK and this book must surely be a contender for the 2019 Prize.

This search seems to give her book a shape and pattern – the book being effectively rearranged in three parts – each concentrating on a particular relationship (respectively her mother, her psychoanalyst grandmother and her unborn daughter) and on a scientific figure (Wilhelm Röntgen – who discovered x-rays, Sigmund Freud and his children, John Hunter – a pioneering surgeon and collector, who helped introduce science back to the practice of medicine, his brother William and the anatomical sketches they commissioned from Jan van Rymdsdyk, including of the dissection of a heavily pregnant woman with a full-term fetus).

Initially these sections can seem disjointed both within themselves (between the narrators reflections on her life and the scientific parts) and between the different sections – but gradually the reader uncovers the overlaps between these parts – the recurring themes of stripping apart, examination, of transitions, of boundaries, of the difference and interaction between the superficial and deep.

At this point and to give a flavour for the book (and simply because I noted down so much of the book – the book being littered with post-it notes when I finished), a number of examples are useful:

On something which the narrator obsesses about – that Röntgen handed in his first paper on X-rays on the same day the Lumière brothers first publically showed their collection of cinematography:

Rontgen ... had seen all that had been solid go towards transparency. Opaque materials, wood, stone, his own flesh – had been reduced for him to shadowed outline, leaving the image of a substrate world spread out across a photographic plate, a catalogue of metal and bone and all that would not rot to set against cinema's preservation of surface – “

The initial excitement of the public at x-rays (and a link forward to Freud's work) *[hope that] knowing the constitution of their bodies they might be granted understanding of their minds*

Freud and the Vienna Psychoanalytic society – *this earnest group of men saw themselves ... as architects of a future in which clarity was assured and all the convoluted crenellations of the mind would be unfolded*

Her grandmother taking about analysis told her *Without reflection, without the capacity to trace our lives backwards and pick the patterns out, we become liable to act as animals do, minus foresight and according to a set of governing laws, which we have never taken the trouble to explore. Without reflection, we do little more than drift upon the surface of things and self-determination is an illusion.*

And later *When a person has gained the skills necessary to explore the territory for themselves, to unpack their own minds and begin to understand the contents, they might start the work necessary to make their experience, their behaviour meaningful: and then at last they might start to become transparent to*

themselves

Comparing her pregnant self to Susini's Anatomical Venus (a clear link to the sketches of van Rymdsdyk) *I imagine how I would look laid out like this, formed into layers, each one a shell, demountable, and at the centre of it the indivisible nut my child makes, and how then all of it might be removed, stacked carefully up beside my open, undecaying carcass*

On her daughter growing up: *Now she stands apart and I must reach for her, on each occasion a little further until it seems her progress towards adulthood is a kind of disappearance and that I know her less and less the more she becomes herself*

Her mother's illness (shortly after twenty one) – *her need for me forcing into reverse that inevitable process of separation which was the work of adolescence*

Sorting through her mother's possessions: *To pick through dusty boxes, to sift through memories which fray and tear like ageing paper in an effort to find out who we are, is to avoid the responsibility of choice, since when it comes to it we only have ourselves, now, and the ever narrowing cone of what we might enact*

When tending to her child *I see the outline of my mother's hands beneath the skin of mine . and I hear her voice in mine performing the liturgy of endearments, those sibilant invitations to returning sleep – and I wonder if these things are soothing in themselves or if it is rather that through generational repetition they have become that way, a memory taught and retaught, the epigenetics of comfort: I feel memory as enactment and my mother, my grandmother, in my hands and my arms, a half-presence, no longer lost*

What I found particularly clever about this book was the way that its own subject matter becomes a meta-commentary on how the book itself is constructed, for example: the importance of the boundaries between the scientific historical sections and those sections with the narrators own musings; the way that layers are peeled back, examined and later reassembled – with the superficial in literary and anatomical terms contrasted with the deep; the importance of the “bare bones” of the novel's structure overlaid with the interwoven complexity of the themes that run like blood vessels and nerves through it. Even the author's idiosyncrasies of punctuation, with paragraphs and sentences ending with “ – “ (see the Röntgen example above) emphasises the idea of boundary and transition.

I found the descriptions of the process of bereavement moving. For example, on realising she cannot bleed her mother's radiators, reset her boiler, or replace the salt in her dishwater: *This is where grief is found, in these suddenly unfilled cracks, these responsibilities – minute, habitual – which have lain elsewhere for years and which, having failed amongst grief's greater broil to be reapportioned, are overlooked in favour of the more dramatic, until even the ordinary starts to crumble*

I also loved and particularly identified (albeit very imperfectly as the father some of the descriptions of pregnancy in the third part)

On welcoming a second child, while making the first still feel full loved *A reminder to our daughter that completion is elastic and she was enough even as we planned her augmentation*

Differences in her and Johannes view of pregnancy: *What I felt as a set of prohibitions and a physical incapacity, a slow-fast remaking of my own biology, was for him hardly more than anticipation, like waiting for Christmas to come*

Then how she describes her feelings and experiences watching a foetal heart trace, her meetings with consultants (her pregnancy from the day the baby was found breech *a series of waits on uncomfortable chairs clutching plastic cups from the water fountain in the corner of the waiting room*), undergoing an ECV, the early stages of induction *two days spent walking round and round the hospital car park in the hope labour might begin* and their contrast with its violent ending, and birth as *a ten hour lesson in topography*

I also found the (inadvertent) links with other Women's Prize books fascinating: Freud considering his youngest daughter and eventual collaborator and continuer of his work his *Anna Antigone* (linking to Home Fire); On Johannes before the birth *He would not feel the child's weight until he held it in his arms* – linking to the most harrowing aspects of *The Trick to Time*)

Overall I found this an outstanding book.
