



The Only Harmless Great Thing

Brooke Bolander

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The Only Harmless Great Thing is a heart-wrenching alternative history by Brooke Bolander that imagines an intersection between the Radium Girls and noble, sentient elephants.

In the early years of the 20th century, a group of female factory workers in Newark, New Jersey slowly died of radiation poisoning. Around the same time, an Indian elephant was deliberately put to death by electricity in Coney Island.

These are the facts.

Now these two tragedies are intertwined in a dark alternate history of rage, radioactivity, and injustice crying out to be righted. Prepare yourself for a wrenching journey that crosses eras, chronicling histories of cruelty both grand and petty in search of meaning and justice.

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The Only Harmless Great Thing Details

Date : Published January 23rd 2018 by Tor.com

ISBN :

Author : Brooke Bolander

Format : Kindle Edition 93 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Fantasy, Fiction, Alternate History, Historical, Historical Fiction, Novella

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From Reader Review The Only Harmless Great Thing for online ebook

Matthew Quann says

A charming oddity, *The Only Harmless Great Thing* provided an evening of loquacious elephants, radiation, and some surprisingly tight writing. Though an atypical choice of subject matter, an alternate history of the radium girls crossed with intelligent and communicative elephants works surprisingly well. Alternating between a modern and 1920s-era storyline, Bolander positions the historical influence of the unfolding 1920s story as an impetus for the modern research-oriented tale. It makes for a tight conclusion by the end of its 90 pages, with an emotional finish earned by the opening chapters.

What truly carries this novella is some A+ writing from Bolander. The disintegration of the lead radium girl is brought to disconcerting life through vividly-painted similes and a keen sense of sensory description. Some of the sentences in the book pop off the page they are so nicely put together, and that's always a pleasant surprise in a book taken up on a whim. What's more, I loved the histories of the elephants and the unique cadence of their language.

So, this is a SF, but mostly new-weird tale that is easily digestible and filled to the brim with fun and adventurous writing. I love the risks Tor.com has taken with their novella line and when it produces reads of this calibre, it's hard not to take notice of whatever else they have coming down the pipeline. At a mere 90 pages, this is definitely worth a read for SF fans!

j says

Well that was a punch in the gut.

Emily says

I LOVED this.

At times the prose took a bit of effort to get through, but that's because the prose is so lush. It leaned a little heavily on consonance, but ultimately I think that served as a great metaphor. The Many Mothers (the collective memory/storytelling archetype of this story's sentient elephants) tell their stories in song, so adding a level of lyricality to the prose enhanced that aspect of the story.

I enjoyed the structure of this novella quite a bit. It's essentially told in three parts, all interwoven throughout. In one we follow a young female scientist in a modern setting who wants to convince the elephants, treated as a kind of sovereign nation, to basically guard a nuclear waste dump site. By starting the story with this element, Bolander immediately draws the reader in. We know right away what questions we should be asking, what to look out for. In a novella this short (under 100 pages), expediting that process is extremely important. We want to know, why elephants? Why are elephants associated with nuclear stuff? How does this have to do with Topsy the elephant, who is mentioned in these sections?

That brings us to the novella's second component--the recent past. This is a bit of alternate history, tweaking the stories of the real-life Radium girls (female factory workers who were told to "point" their brushes on their lips before applying radium paint to watch faces) and Topsy the elephant (a circus elephant that killed multiple people and was ultimately put to death by poison, hanging, *and* electrocution. Her execution was filmed by the Edison Manufacturing company). In these sections we follow a poor Radium girl who's body is slowly decaying as a result of radiation exposure on her job (I could go on and on about the use of this metaphor because DAMN). The world in which this is set has elephants that are even more sentient than the ones we know--they can work, communicate with humans, and basically exist as second class citizens. "Problem" elephants, like Topsy, are brought to work in the Radium factory after the sick girls file a lawsuit. It's a story about tragedy and exploitation and rage, and I loved it.

The third part of this book is about the "furmother" (presumably a wooly mammoth), the first of the Many Mothers. These portions are the most lyrical, the prose at times difficult to decipher but always rewarding. Here we examine strength, cunning, the power of parable, and the importance of telling stories.

I can't emphasize enough how impactful this little book is. Under 100 pages, and what a punch it packs.

XX Sarah XX (former Nefarious Breeder of Murderous Crustaceans) says

Brooke Bolander Maths :

And You Shall Know Her by the Trail of Dead

+

Our Talons Can Crush Galaxies

=

TO READ THIS POST HASTE I NEED.

Alasdair Stuart says

Brooke Bolander's work has been defined to date by a combination of relentlessly precise language and colossal emotion depth and focus. Her short fiction is seared through with images that linger after you've finished reading and turns of phrase that sit on the backs of your eyes like the after image of the Sun. There is nothing that she's written that is less than brilliant.

This is the best thing she's written to date.

Combining two separate historical atrocities, Bolander explores both the scandal of the Radium Girls, a group of female factory workers killed by radiation poisoning from the paint that they were using and the

murder of Topsy the elephant by electrocution. On their own, each of these is a low point for humanity. The first a brutally uncaring piece of feral capitalism. The second the murder of an animal turned into sport.

Together, here, Bolander does something extraordinary; makes them the basis for hope. Hard fought, incomplete, bloodied hope. But hope nonetheless.

The idea is simple and elegant and extraordinary. Elephants, with what's believed to be a measure of sentience, take over from the Radium Girls. As one of the Girls, her body falling apart, teaches her replacement the two women bond. They're different species, different minds, but they've both been used up, both been exploited. And they're both murderously, savagely angry.

Bolander cuts between their narrative, a second decades into the future and the oral history of the elephants to create a story that feels expansive even in such a short page count. You get everything you need to know about the modern day version of this world, the elephants and the incidents that led to the present day plot. You also get a glimpse into a world one quarter turn away from our own. It's a novella that's constantly light on it's feet; never slowing down and never stopping even as the biological frames of it's leads break down. They're powered by righteous anger. The novella is powered by them and the world it depicts is powered by that anger as much as they are. Not to mention a jet black streak of humour and endless, bruised compassion.

This is an astonishing debut in this format from an astonishing writer. It seethes with rage and love and knowledge. It demands to be read. Listen to it.

Leseparatist says

[like how Topsy's actions led to legislature and elephant rights, or how her story could get disneyfied (hide spoiler)]

Michael Hicks says

The Only Harmless Great Thing is a tough one for me to digest, and I'm not quite sure what to say about it. The narrative round-robins its way through multiple points of view: we have, at the book's core, an alternate history take on the Radium Girls, factory girls who were killed by radiation poisoning, who are being replaced by elephants; we have a story strand set in the future; and we have the myth of it all, stretching across the span of existence, as told by elephants relaying the stories to others.

For a novella that's just shy of 100 pages, there's a lot going on here. Simultaneously, the work feels somewhat unfinished and anticlimactic, and despite there being enough information conveyed across the multiple points of view to piece together a nearly complete whole, the book just kind of fizzles to a stop.

Still, it's a briskly paced novella with enough interesting conceits to have kept me ensnared. The relationship between Regan and Topsy, a Radium Girl and her replacement elephant, was particularly well done and posed an interesting dynamic. On the writing front, Brooke Bolander is a heck of a wordsmith, and this story is beautifully written. After only a few pages, I could immediately see why she's been a finalist the Hugo, Nebula, and Locus awards. She is seriously talented!

Ultimately, I just think I'm not the target audience for this book. It's beautifully written, has some great ideas, but unfortunately it never quite gelled for me.

Elise (TheBookishActress) says

“No matter what you did, forty or fifty or a hundred years passed and everything became a narrative to be toyed with, masters of media alchemy splitting the truth's nucleus into a ricocheting cascade reaction of diverging alternate realities.”

This novella is a story about stealing back your narrative from those who wish to change it, to sanitize history and make their own actions sound good. It is a discussion of the animal capacity to feel and the morality of making animals props in our war. And it is a discussion of the human tendency to let things progress as long as it doesn't hurt the privileged class. With a discussion of revisionism, a strong undercurrent of revolt against the horrors of our past, and compelling leads, it is *so* amazing.

It's amazing how much I've begun to appreciate Tor's recent novellas. Short fiction like this is a really amazing medium for thematic explorations that might not be conveyed in long-form fiction, and perhaps more importantly, Tor's novellas are so in my niche. Novellas like this one are about revolt against oppressive institutions and the subtle patterns humanity exhibits, whether in an alternate universe or our own. There's so much here crammed into so few pages and I love it.

I honestly don't have a lot else to say about this - morality discussions of this caliber benefit from actually being read - but I want to mention one thing so you're prepared: this novella is *weird*. I mean, just try reading that blurb. It is a fucking TRIP. And the story itself is one too, honestly - quickly-changing perspectives made the first 20 pages or so a bit difficult to read. But as the book progresses, it becomes easier and easier to connect to the story and the characters. And maybe the weirdness is a good thing: I can honestly say I have never read anything like this before and I doubt I ever will. Brooke Bolander is definitely an author to watch in the future. This novella made a huge personal impact on me and I'd totally recommend it for a short but super developed thematic meditation.

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karen says

in just under a hundred pages, brooke bolander figured out a way to rewrite american history so it's even *worse*, develop two-and-change distinct storylines, flesh out the thoughts, traditions, mythologies, language, and other components of a cultural heritage belonging to a familiar nonhuman species, and drag the reader through puddles of sorrow and sick-feelings before shaking 'em off into hope, triumph, and a raised fist of “fuck *all* y'all.”

plus, she manages all of that in this strikingly fanciful singsongy prose that is very appealing and adds even more dimension to the story with its suggestion of “otherness:”

Each moonrise the metal bird in the box screams a mad *musth* cry. Like all Man-things, the bird is obsessed with the rising and setting of the sun. The night-whistle signals rest. The night-whistle signals a bag full of tasteless dried oats, a brief escape from sad dead girls and tormenting men, and four more wooden walls, the inside of a dry skull plugged tight with moldy hay and dung. She remembers a place where the Night was made of warm shuffle and star-graze, tearing up sweet wet grass by the trunkful with moonshaded Mothers when she was old enough to tooth. She remembers, but there is no sweet grass to tear up by the trunkful, so instead she thoughtfully tears apart her stall, board by splintered board. There will be a beating in the morning. There are always beatings in the morning.

lovely, bittersweet, and powerful. it delivers so much more than its length suggests. read it, read it, read it now - you definitely have the time.

this is a reese's peanut butter cup of shameful american history. i must devour it.

Acqua says

3.75 stars.

***The Only Harmless Great Thing* is one of the most unusual books I've ever read.** It's alternate history, and maybe it's even set in an alternate universe, as here elephants can talk with human through sign language.

Its premise is brilliant in its simplicity and weirdness: what if we combined the tragic story of Topsy the elephant with the tragic story of the Radium Girls? It's a great idea, really - in its very few pages, this novelette manages to talk about both the exploitation of women and animal abuse in US history.

It's weird *and* sad *and* angry, but can a story with this premise not be?

When I started it, I had no idea of what was going on, but after a few pages I understood that **it follows four different PoVs, and at least three different timelines.**

- **Kat** is a scientist who is trying to find a way to hide nuclear waste so that no one will want to come near it. Her idea involves glowing elephants, who are, after the "Topsy incident", tied to nuclear radiation in the collective imagination.
- **Regan** is a dying Radium Girl who is teaching elephants how to work with the poisonous paint. She knows she's teaching them how to die, but she needs money - or, maybe, there's something she can do to change things before she dies.
- **Topsy** is the elephant at the center of the tragedy that will change everything.
- **Furmother** is a character in the elephants' folktales. What they value the most are stories, the stories that elephants separated from their families will never get to tell.

The Only Harmless Great Thing is also really short. **Too short for me to really get to know the characters,**

and too short to have a conclusion that didn't feel rushed. I felt like one of the plotlines didn't get closure. I also didn't love the writing - it wasn't bad, it was... confusing, and while that made you *feel* the anger of the characters, it was difficult for me to get into the story.

I received an ARC (advanced reader copy) from the publisher via NetGalley in exchange for an honest review.

Fiona says

Try not to judge them; their mothers were short-lived, forgetful things, clans led by bulls with short memories and shorter tempers.

"Them" above being the human race - good luck not feeling at least a little judgy by the end of this excellent novella.

Combine the real world inspiration of Topsy the elephant, with another real life story of the Radium Girls, with another almost-true story of using glowing animals to warn future generations of nuclear waste hazards (happily someone remembered signs are a thing), and you could easily end up with a preachy mess. But Brooke Bolander's writing is as excellent as ever, and instead we're left with a perfectly balanced and heartbreaking book that tackles issues as weighty as the elephants themselves.

It is short, so I'm not going to spoil it, but don't go in expecting to renew your faith in humanity. And if you've any doubts on the intelligence of an elephant, let me leave you with the reunion of Shirley and Jenny, two ex-circus elephants, over twenty years since they were separated.

Elephants really are the best.

Lata says

Combining the sad and sickening histories of the US radium dial painters and an abused and murdered elephant, Topsy, Brooke Bolander has crafted a tightly written, brutal story of corporate greed and inhumane treatment, with some beautiful, elephant myth-making.

Sarah says

This was an interesting idea - a rewriting/reimagined history combining the female Newark workers affected by radiation in the early 1900s, and the electrocution of an elephant in Coney Island which took place around the same time.

Sounds good on paper but it didn't work for me. The first part was super confusing - there were about three different narrators and too much was going on. The second part was more readable but most of my interest had been lost by then. There were glimmers of something more promising but unfortunately it all fell kind of

flat in the end.

Crini says

I feel kind of bad about my rating after seeing so many raving about this, saying how tragically sad this is, but I didn't feel anything at all while reading this.

It's a typical "it's me, not you" case because the writing style wasn't for me at all and had me more confused than anything else. I just couldn't get into it and was waiting to actually feel something but I felt completely disconnected to it the events of the story from start to finish.

Cassandra says

So.

Caveats first: I'm another Tor.com author; I know Brooke Bolander as a friend. The draft I read? One of the earlier versions of the finished product, I'm sure.

But stranger, if you're here, combing through the wilds of Goodreads to see if this book is worth pre-ordering or buying, the answer's simple:

Yessssss.

The Only Harmless Great Thing is a raw nerve, played by an orchestra. A song of ache and ghosts, radium girls whispering from across the ether, a thousand bad things tied together with the question 'what if' and given the opportunity to exact a grim revenge. It has angry elephants. It has girls at the end of their ropes. It has desperation. It is full of dying.

And it is beautiful. Bolander swings between three PoVs in a tightly plotted narrative, changing voices for each. And I'm not talking about small little changes. Every voice has its own melody, its own cadence and lilt. And it is all still perfectly Bolander with her jagged, seething, desert-wind prose. This book was gorgeous, unforgettable when I first saw it.

By the time you see it?

Goddamn.
