



The Mistress Of Nothing

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Lady Duff Gordon is the toast of Victorian London. But when her debilitating tuberculosis means exile, she and her devoted lady's maid, Sally, set sail for Egypt. It is Sally who describes, with a mixture of wonder and trepidation, the odd menage marshalled by the resourceful Omar, which travels down the Nile to a new life in Luxor. When Lady Duff Gordon undoes her stays and takes to native dress, throwing herself into weekly salons; language lessons; excursions to the tombs; Sally too adapts to a new world, affording her heady and heartfelt freedoms never known before. But freedom is a luxury that a maid can ill-afford, and when Sally grasps more than her status entitles her to, she is brutally reminded that she is mistress of nothing.

The Mistress Of Nothing Details

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Author : Kate Pullinger

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From Reader Review The Mistress Of Nothing for online ebook

Alexis says

I'm not generally one for historical fiction but I really loved this book. It won the 2009 Governor General's award for fiction, which is well deserved. It tells the story of real life Victorian English adventurer, Lucie Duff Gordon, who went to live in Egypt for numerous years along with her maid, Sally Nardett. The book is told from Sally's point of view.

The story is deceptively simple, but there's a lot in here, and it's a nuanced story with multiple themes. It appears straight forward, but when you go into the story you get greater implications.

Highly recommended!

joy *the clean-reader extraordinaire* says

i honestly have NO idea why this doesn't get better reviews around here. it is fantastic! perhaps it's a bit too literary for the average goodreader? not by much, though, and the prose is gorgeous. i stayed up late to finish it.

pg13 for unmarried relations of the *fade to black* type, illness, war/rebellion/suffering, and perhaps an epithet or two.

Roberta says

What to say about this book?

It was fascinating following the trek through Egypt! Each place the characters visited was someplace that I looked up online so I could virtually travel with them through this magical, enchanting land (one of my favorite things to do while reading a book). The descriptions were brief but enticing.

Just as it was fascinating to virtually visit all of the places in Egypt, it was troubling to follow the characters through their roles. The story is based on a Victorian-era woman: Lucie Duff Gordon (a real person) and her personal servant, Sally. The lady must leave the dampness of England for the dry, hot air of Egypt because of her tuberculosis and her maid leaves everything behind to care for her mistress.

Sally is the real protagonist of the story and it is through her eyes that we see the ancient beauty of Egypt, the customs and language of the Muslim Egyptians in the late 1800's, the perplexing mixture of ready charm and bitter harshness in her mistress, and the joy and torment of true love discovered in a very foreign land.

Sally has refused all advances from men because she holds the duty of her service as a dear object to be carefully protected. A good position in a respected household in Victorian England was not something that you would easily abandon. Her surprise at falling slowly in love with an Egyptian man is presented tenderly and the reader cannot help but hope that life will finally give this lovely girl some of what she has missed. Alas, it is not nearly that easy for her, or for Omar. You see, Omar is already married and, although he is allowed to take a second wife, avoiding scandal is paramount. While he is quite willing to accept Sally's love and everything it offers, he is not willing to make any sacrifices for her or lose his position with Ms. Duff

Gordon!

Witnessing the choices that each must and does make as their story progresses was a moving journey in itself.

The story is based on letters from Ms. Duff Gordon (the Lucie Duff Gordon letters from Egypt were published in book form in 1865). She and her servant spent many years in Egypt and Sally was a loyal and devoted servant, but (apparently), Sally did not deserve any kindness or compassion even though she sacrificed everything to travel with and care for her mistress for many long, difficult years. It was strange that a woman (LDG)--who reportedly was the toast of any party--was incapable of the simplest kindness to Sally when her life encountered the challenge of love in Egypt. What turned LDG into such a shrew?

For more information on the book and a brief commentary from the author, reference this link:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-ent....>

Pamela says

[Such an extraordinary book, full of depth, growth, cultural awareness, acceptance, feminism, outrage, knowledge and more and more and more. And, yes, Sally won, as is fitting.

ENDING, as Sally watches her former Lady's funeral:

"But now I do know better, and in light of my Lady's behaviour towards me, I look back at Aunt Clara and I do blame her. How could she have seen me off, out of her house, into service, so quickly, so soon after the death of my parents? Me, her only sister's e

Trish says

At first I was a little taken aback that this book was not written in the voice of Lady Duff Gordon, on whose letters this novel was based. I thought I might prefer the voice of the woman whose entrance into a room made the party brighter, suddenly more fashionable, very *au courant*. Lady Duff Gordon suffered from a malady of the lungs, which required a warm, dry climate rather than that of England at the turn of the 20th century. She left her family and moved to Egypt with her lady's maid and spent the bulk of her time in Luxor, home of the tombs of the pharaohs and the Sphinx. She enjoyed a wide circle of friends among the local intelligentsia.

Little was recorded of her lady's maid, Sally Naldrett, but this is a book told in her voice—how first Lady Gordon shed her English clothing and mannerisms, and then Sally did. How they both became acclimatized to life in Egypt, learned Arabic, and how Sally felt she had shed her old, lonely maid's life for a life both warm and passionate. How she outgrew her position of servility alone, and became a woman on her own terms. The story is lightly and quickly told, but develops an urgency in its later pages that belies the sunny outlook of its beginning.

In writing this novel, Kate Pullinger drew on biography of Gordon written by Katherine Frank, called *Lucie Duff Gordon: A Passage to Egypt*, published in 1995. It was republished in 2007 by Tauris Parke Paperbacks and is said to show the sparkling nature of the vivacious Lady Gordon. A darker side of that character is hinted at in this novel, leaving lingering questions about a widely admired woman whose family shunned her, and who shunned others, brutally and unforgivably, in return. One is eager to turn to the original materials to get to the heart of the matter. One feels sure there is still a novel in the material there, this time

from the view of Lady Duff Gordon (1821-1869), whom even the Prince and Princess of Wales came to visit in Luxor when she was too ill to travel.

This is a small, pocket-sized book which can transport you to places far off and long ago, and for that, it is amply worth the time and expense of acquiring it. Later, when I was looking through Kate Pullinger's website, I came across a blogpost speaking of Ellen, Sally Naldrett's sister, who makes an appearance in the book. It gives one tingles to think that rich lives went unrecorded and unremembered until now.

Karen says

The first few chapters, even the first half, of this book is pretty good, and held my interest. Pullinger's rendering of Sally's voice is intriguing, and Pullinger masterfully builds suspense, a sense of impending catastrophe. But I was very disappointed with the second half. (Spoiler!) Pullinger's first mistake, I think, was not having us present at the birth of Sally's baby, not letting us see Lady Duff Gordon as she is confronted with the situation. And from this point, once Sally has had the baby, the book sort of falls apart. We simply don't have any sense of why Lady Duff Gordon has reacted the way she has. My guess is that Pullinger doesn't know. She seems to think that because this is based on a true story, she needn't render Gordon's actions in a way that makes sense to us -- it happened this way, right? -- with the end result that we get no further insight, to much of anything. Pullinger hardly explores this apparent contradiction in Gordon's character and she asserts Omar's motivation rather than show it. I completely lost interest by the last third; I skimmed the pages only to find out what happened, at the end. (Which is isn't much.)

Robin says

I picked this up on the dollar shelf at the back of a bookstore, and it's much better than that. Fascinating tale told from the perspective of a lady's maid, based on a true story. I love that the author wanted to tell her story. And it's based on real circumstances.

Great insight into older cultures. I'm glad I read it.

Megan Baxter says

I am procrastinating on starting this review, because it's one of those books I struggle to write about. If there's lots to love, I am effusive. If there's lots to hate, I rant. Then there are those books that are just fine, but that's all they seem to be, and you try to sit down to find enough words to make up a review worth writing, and they prove to be elusive little buggers.

Note: The rest of this review has been withheld due to the changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision [here](#).

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at [Smorgasbook](#)

Marie says

I was quickly drawn into this story based on the life of Lucie Duff Gordon. This unusual, progressive woman, whose life is greatly affected by TB, left her family to live in Egypt in the hope of healing in the warm climate. The story takes place in the mid 1800s. Her only companion for the voyage is her maid, Sally, who is herself unusual given her station in life. Drawing from Duff Gordon's letters, the author describes vividly what the two women experience on the journey both in terms of the country and people they discover but also about themselves. I enjoyed very much that part of the book, the voyage down the Nile, the heat, the village life, etc. Where I lost interest is when Pullinger, no longer using the material from the letters, tells the story of Sally -who is the narrator- once they are settled in Luxor. Sally loses her appeal as an interesting character and becomes uni-dimensional. The curious, adventurous Sally does not feel credible or perhaps, all along, she was not who she seemed to be.

Arti says

The book sounds so promising at the start. I was intensely interested at first, but dissolved into indifference and finally even annoyance. Based on the real historical figure of one Lady Lucie Duff-Gordon (1821-1869), an English woman self-exiled to Egypt due to incurable illness (TB). Staying in England would only hasten her demise. So she took her long-time lady's maid Sally Naldrett with her to hopefully salvage some remaining quality days. She survived seven years in Egypt. From Luxor she had written a series of letters over those years, mailing them back to England to her family. The letters were later published as a book. Her story is based on historical facts. Her maid Sally was also a real-life character. But what happened to her during those years is totally up to the author's own imagination.

Sally falls in love with an Egyptian servant Omar who works as a cook and a butler for the Lady. The lovers lead a secret love life without the detection of anyone. Sally later is pregnant with Omar's child. They later marry and she continues with her pregnancy in Lady Duff-Gordon's home. The fact that Sally carries the child until delivery without anybody noticing, especially not her lady, is a quite beyond comprehension. What more, Lady Duff Gordon's reaction to her is unconvincing as well. Known for her benevolence to the Egyptian people, and a progressive woman resisting any totalitarian powers, Lady Duff-Gordon somehow is so seized with rage that she drives Sally away from her home. And yet she keeps Omar close to her to continue as her trusted and faithful servant.

Lots of potentials to depict in a nuanced and deeper way the power relations (like e.g. Girl with a Pearl Earring) and cultural and personal conflicts remain untapped. Well, maybe not exactly untapped. Rather, the narration is straight forward and lacks depth. All feelings and thoughts are laid out explicitly, leaving the readers with very little room for their own imagination, and too scanty an offering of literary enjoyment. Winner of the GG? I'm truly baffled.

Stephanie says

I really enjoyed this book--an English lady suffering from perhaps "consumption" in the mid 1800s, is forced to leave her family behind in search of hotter and drier living conditions to aid her breathing. She, Lady Duff Gordon, and her ladies' maid Sally end up in Egypt. It was fascinating to read about their travels and stay in Egypt. There is not a lot of action in the story, but it centres around Sally and her role in the Lady's

household, and how it changes once she becomes pregnant and married. It is the descriptive writing that captivated me, and how the characters are so lovingly portrayed--I really felt like they were real (well, they were real in fact, but I mean that I really got to know them!), and because of this lovely writing, I would read something else by Pullinger.

Julie Smith (Knitting and Sundries) says

This review first appeared on my blog: <http://jewelknits.blogspot.com/2011/0...>

In 1862, Sally Naldrett is 30 years old, orphaned at a young age when her parents, Battersea shopkeepers, were killed in a train derailment in Clapham. She and her sister Ellen were sent to live with their Aunt Clara, who, unwilling to feed two more mouths, sent both of them out to service jobs as quickly as she could. Working her way up from a lowly scullery maid, Sally is now lady's maid to Lady Duff Gordon (Lucie), fiercely loyal to her lady, with the belief that ladies' maids do not marry, as their first loyalty is to her lady. She has even turned down offers of marriage because her lady needs her. Her lady treats her well, even having taught her to read and write, which many servants can't do.

Lucie is suffering from consumption, and on the advice of her doctors, is going to live in Egypt for her health. Sally has always dreamed of Egypt, traveling to London on her days off to visit her favorite destination, the Egyptian Sculpture Gallery in the museum there. Lucie and Sally travel without Lucie's family to Egypt, and this is the story of their stay and of the journeys they took while there. Even more, it is a story of Sally becoming a woman of her own while still remaining loyal to her lady and of the slowly unraveling path of loyalty, friendship, and betrayal that Sally experiences.

Based on a true story (part of which is chronicled in Lady Duff's "Letters from Egypt"), and told from Sally's perspective, you will marvel with her at the wonders of Egypt, worry with her about the health of her lady, rejoice with her when she finally gets a taste of her own love, and sorrow for her at the result. Told in wonderfully evocative prose, this is a sweeping tale that will pull you in and not let you go until it's bittersweet end.

QUOTES (from an ARC; may be different in final version):

My lady had come to Egypt to evade death, but in Egypt I found life.

At times on our travels I fancied us a tribe of thieves, my Lady, Omar and me. We were stealing time, creating our own world, new lives for us all together, in Luxor, on the Nile, in Egypt, we three. But I smashed all this; I destroyed my lady's peace.

I hated her beautifully; my hatred was polished and hard and shiny and, truth be told, at times it sustained me.

BOOK RATING: 4.5 out of 5 stars

Ariel Leigh says

I was exceptionally disappointed with this book; I was reading an Advanced Reader's Edition, so perhaps the official release is better. However, I doubt that the sheer underwhelming nature of this book would have been revised.

For a travel/adventure story, particularly one that is meant to emulate a Victorian expedition to Egypt, I found the narrative to be extremely lacking in the sensory detail and vivid description that I craved. The most sensuous Pullinger's language got was to state the obvious and describe how 'hot' it was in Africa. The broken Arabic strewn throughout did less to garnish the book with atmosphere and more to give it the feel of a reading exercise for a foreign language class. The book felt all together rushed without these details, yet simultaneously the actual narrative dragged and dragged considerably. I succumbed easy to distraction while reading this. There was also some anachronistic language, and a mere spattering of vaguely relevant allusions and famous figureheads throughout the beginning of the novel (which left me quite curious as to why some appropriate allusions were ignored). Nothing felt particularly Victorian or English, nor did anything feel particularly Egyptian.

The didactic first chapter of Sally's reflection excited me at the prospect of examining the sociological implications of class (and subsequently race) throughout the text; but most of these were inserted at the last possible moment in the latter chapters of the book, leaving the reader with considerable ambiguity prior to these (view spoiler). Other inconsistencies (such as name references and in-frame recollections) stand out, as well.

I genuinely wanted to enjoy this; but I felt that what there was to enjoy was scant and undefined. No significant character development happens until the latter half of the novel, and even then all of the characters are fairly weak and fractured without much emotional investment in any of the dramatic events. There was very little room to sympathize with Sally and her situation in spite of it being the default setting, since Omar's wife, Omar and Lady Duff Gordon were portrayed in the darkest shadows suddenly after standing under the hottest spotlights. I was astonished to read that this book has received accolades for having "one of the most distinctive and memorable voices in recent literature," as even though the entire book was from her perspective, I ended without really knowing who Sally was or why her story particularly mattered.

Felice says

The Mistress of Nothing takes it's start from real life. Lady Lucie Duff Gordon wrote her famous Letters from Egypt in the 1860's after being forced to go there from her home in England because of consumption. Although Gordon was a famous entertainer and trendsetter in England she was not rich. So when she was forced to leave her family and go away for her health she was only able to bring one maid along with her, Sally Naldrett. Once in Egypt both women go native. They abandon their Victorian expectations and the social conventions of their times. For the first time in their lives they experience freedom of mind and body. The two also become friends rather than mistress and servant. They learn Arabic, dress in traditional Egyptian clothing and are accepted and welcomed into the local Egyptian community.

The working life of Sally Naldrett put her in a position to contribute to literature and history and yet she remained far away on the outskirts of both. It was clever of Pullinger to use a peripheral person in the life of a well known one as the conduit for the story of the celebrity and for their hypocrisy.

In The Mistress of Nothing, Pullinger does a very good job recreating Egypt in the 1860's. It's a fascinating

look at a native culture outside of the colonial system of the time. The novel hums along interestingly covering Egypt, medicine and the relationships between Sally, Gordon and their local dragoman, Omar, until it gets to Sally's crisis. Just when the conflict in this story truly begins, the drama ends. Overall *The Mistress of Nothing* was a disappointment. The only surprise for me was that the book was the winner of Canada's Governor General's Literary Award in 2009.

Korey says

This has some passages of pretty descriptive writing but unfortunately it's total snooze outside of some nice prose. I doubt I would have finished it if it hadn't been so short. I actually need a plot and/or well developed characters to enjoy a book.

Lata says

I am ambivalent about this book. I skimmed my way through most of the book.

Marjorie Campbell says

This is a fabulous book. I read it in one sitting and must say that Pullinger manages to keep you interested in a domestic story of manners for the entire length. It is a very interesting insight into Victorian mores and make me wonder at whether the role between domestic staff and their employers has changed much. The presumptions which dominate the relationship between Lady Duff and her lady's made, Sally, are fascinating. The fact that the mistress treats everyone as if it is a privilege to work for her and often forgets what a hardship it might be for them is incredible (it is clear that due her own reduced circumstances she is often unable to pay Sally and Omar and that they make personal sacrifices - going without food themselves - to be sure that she does not do without). Her own intellectual pursuits and passions - universal suffrage being one while in England and human rights for the Egyptians - do not seem to be applied to those in her closest circle and it never seems to occur to her how similar and arbitrary her own actions are towards those she has power over. This is also a subtle and masterful portrait of the manipulative world view of a long-time invalid. I would highly recommend this book.

Cynthia says

I did not realize this was based on a true story until I read the author note at the back of the book. Somehow, that let me give it the extra star. I liked this book very much, but found it nearly unbearably sad in parts. I have recently read several books where the main character is rather slow to understand the world around them and the consequences of their actions. So I was annoyed that was the case again and I held a grudge while reading.

Still, it was compelling--the idea of English woman living in Egypt, learning Arabic, wearing Egyptian

clothing, etc was beautifully detailed and fully drawn. Ms. Pullinger is a good writer, giving the reader the sense of being there, feeling the heat, the sand, etc. (Of course it was crazy hot last week in NJ, so maybe that played a part in feeling the heat). I felt the story was rushed at the end--probably more a function of editing than writing. The pace of the first section was so wonderfully slow and detailed. I wish the entire book had been.

It stays with me even a week later--I find myself considering Sally and the choices she made. That is the mark of a 4 star book and I am glad that I was able to reward that extra star in the end...

Lacey says

This book was amazing! It was a quick read at 249 pages, but mostly because I couldn't put it down. I ended up reading the whole thing on a Saturday afternoon. I loved everything about it, I don't like to put spoilers in my reviews so you will have to read it to find out the details as to why. The main character had me by the heart-strings the whole book. This book was amazingly well written, although it did take me a chapter or two to get use to the author's writing style. I enjoyed being taken to Egypt and learning about the culture, as I had never read a book featuring this location. I would highly recommend to anyone that loves historical fiction.

Trish says

At first I was a little taken aback that this book was not written in the voice of Lady Duff Gordon, on whose letters this novel was based. I thought I might prefer the voice of the woman whose entrance into a room made the party brighter, suddenly more fashionable, very *au courant*. Lady Duff Gordon suffered from a malady of the lungs, which required a warm, dry climate rather than that of England at the turn of the 20th century. She left her family and moved to Egypt with her ladies' maid and spent the bulk of her time in Luxor, home of the tombs of the pharaohs and the Sphinx. She enjoyed a wide circle of friends among the local intelligentsia.

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This is a small, pocket-sized book that will reliably transport you to shores unknown. For the investment (e.g., time, money), this is well worth the dreaming.
