



## The Minotaur

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## **The Minotaur** Barbara Vine

As soon as Kerstin Kvist arrives at remote, ivy-covered Lydstep Old Hall in Essex, she feels like a character in a gothic novel. A young nurse fresh out of school, Kerstin has been hired for a position with the Cosway family, residents of the Hall for generations. She is soon introduced to her "charge" John Cosway, a thirty-nine-year-old man whose strange behavior is vaguely explained by his mother and sisters as part of the madness that runs in the family.

Weeks go by at Lydstep with little to mark the passage of time beyond John's daily walks and the amusingly provincial happenings that engross the Cosway women, and Kerstin occupies her many free hours at the Hall reading or making entries into her diary. Meanwhile, bitter wrangling among Julia Cosway and her four grown daughters becomes increasingly evident. But this is just the most obvious of the tensions that charge the old remote estate, with its sealed rooms full of mystery. Soon Kerstin will find herself in possession of knowledge she will wish she'd never attained, secrets that will propel the occupants of Lydstep Old Hall headlong into sexual obsession, betrayal, and, finally, murder.

Also available in a Random House Large Print edition and as an eBook.

## **The Minotaur Details**

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Author : Barbara Vine

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## From Reader Review The Minotaur for online ebook

### Stephen Arvidson says

A young Swedish nurse, Kerstin (that's "Shastin") Kvist, takes a post in an isolated Essex estate in this peculiar tale that's straight out of an English Gothic novel. Assigned to care for a mathematical prodigy beset by schizophrenia, Kerstin is unnerved by the female inhabitants of Lystep Old Hall and begins to suspect her new charge's madness is grotesquely rooted in his quartet of neurotic sisters and their strict, scarecrow-esque matriarch.

Among the more worthwhile aspects of Barbara Vine's *The Minotaur* are its evocative imagery and strong Gothic overtones—the old English manor enveloped in green vines, the labyrinthine library, the sleepy Windrose village, etc.—that lend so much color and depth to the story and will stick with readers for a long time. Although set in contemporary times, the story is brimming with veiled allusions to the works of Charlotte Brontë and Jane Austen that's sure to engage readers of Victorian literature.

Vine's characters, particularly those of the maladaptive and toxic Cosway family, are intensely imagined and believable, albeit loathsome in their maddening eccentricities and selfish motivations. One shudders to think of such individuals existing amongst society. Kerstin the heroine is exasperating in both her cluelessness and her willingness to fall in line with the tyrannical edicts of Mrs. Cosway. Kerstin is not only incredibly slow to draw realizations that readers have already made chapters earlier, but she so often fails to speak her mind when it matters most—whether to reveal what she knows to the authorities or to drive some much-needed sense into Ella Cosway over her unrequited relationship with the philandering Felix Dunsford. Although frustrating at times, the Cosways are an unforgettable batch of well-crafted characters; they mesmerize and repel readers with their secrets, their petty squabbles, and their overbearing idiosyncrasies, which, coupled with the author's fine narrative voice, lends greatly to a sense of foreboding.

Absorbing and intelligently written, *The Minotaur* invokes a genteel English milieu that begets cruelty and violence; the novel offers a shrewd psychological examination of the dysfunctional family and the dark side of human nature.

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### Bandit says

From the start I really liked this book. I thought the writing was absolutely phenomenal, top notch character studies that make one understand and appreciate all the praise on the book cover. As I progressed into the book, the reading process became a bit more laborious. I suppose one has to be in that certain BBC sort of mood for this, but the pacing was just so excruciatingly slow. There was this massive build up for a fairly anti climactic and very vague cataclysm and, because of the way the novel was structured starting and ending with the present and the narrator interjecting numerous times the sort of wait for it, wait for it, something's gonna happen pretty soon, in the way anticipating any major occurrence in the book, it just came across as a bit of a let down as far as plot or any mystery of it goes. Barbara Vine is a pseudonym for Ruth Rendell, of whom I think I may have read a short story before, so I was interested to see how she does in the novel form. So, I think any mystery fan would be disappointed by this book, for a set in the past repressed british family in a large house type of novel it was very well written and, although far from the best of those or particularly original, pretty good.

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### **Laura says**

This is my new favorite Barbara Vine novel, and she's my new favorite mystery/thriller/creepy situation author. I listened to this one in the car, and it was read by a woman who did a lovely Swedish accent, but also did terrific, yet subtle voices for the rest of the characters. It's a story that reveals early in the book that there was a "situation" (a bad situation), though you don't know exactly what it is and when it's going to happen. And when it finally does, it's even worse than you'd imagined. Which is great for the reader! It's a quiet book with not much action, but it's a page-turner (or an iPod-player) nonetheless.

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### **Susan says**

*The Minotaur* by Barbara Vine could best be described as a Gothic-mystery / psychological thriller. Despite a lack of experience in psychiatric nursing, Kerstin Kvist, decided to take a position with the Cosway family at the imposing Virginia creeper-entwined Lydstep Old Hall. John Cosway, her new "charge," is a 39-year-old man man being treated for schizophrenia. He lives in a perpetual drug-induced stupor, with his mother and four sisters.

The family matriarch, Julia Cosway is a tyrannical woman who appears to approve of nothing and no one. She does not believe that there is any need for a nurse at the Hall, and immediately makes sure Kerstin is made aware of her opinions. Her eldest daughter Ida Cosway is, well, what do you call a housewife who is not a wife? She basically does all of the cooking and most of the cleaning at Lydstep Old Hall, and seems to be resigned to that appointment. Winifred Cosway appears to be a prim and proper church-going lady. She is a caterer by trade, and has just become engaged to Eric Dawson, the town Vicar. Ella Cosway is an unmarried teacher, and part-time party girl, and the youngest Cosway "child" Zorah is an independently wealthy widow.

Lydstep Old Hall is awash with tension, secrets, and locked rooms full of mystery. An observant student of human nature, Kerstin soon finds herself in possession of uncomfortable information about the Cosways - knowledge that when illuminated after a terrible family tragedy, may prove to be the undoing of the Cosway family.

*The Minotaur* is a haunting masterpiece of psychological suspense. Vine's carefully constructed story is incredibly absorbing, and full of labyrinthine twists and turns that will draw you in to this maze of deceit.

The plot is fairly obvious, but the build-up of the story is truly superb. *The Minotaur* is not really a "who-dun-it" type of mystery, and so will not likely appeal to fans of that sub-genre. Vine is much more interested in the "why" aspect of the crime - the psychological reasons behind the family tragedy - and thus is able to create a thoroughly delicious and engrossing read.

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### **Debra says**

Stephen King recommended author and book. He says: "BEST SUSPENSE NOVELIST (WITH UNDERCURRENTS OF HORROR)

Ruth Rendell, who sometimes writes as Barbara Vine. The Chief Inspector Wexford novels are comfort food that doesn't insult one's intelligence (or upset the stomach); the stand-alones are often quiet masterpieces of terror guaranteed to leave the reader in a cold sweat at 2 a.m. The best example of recent vintage is probably *A Sight for Sore Eyes* (1999). But *The Minotaur*, penned under the Barbara Vine name, is also good, and au currant, as they say.

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### **Connie (Ava Catherine) says**

Whether writing as Barbara Vine or Ruth Rendell, I truly enjoy this author's voice. She writes psychological thrillers that keep the reader on the edge of his/her seat until the very last page. We as readers are given a deep insight into the characters' psychological make-up that creates a sense of suspense and creepiness. In this book, Vine has lined up a cast of characters that define dysfunctional family. The mother seems to have no love to give her five children, and the four girls are constantly in a power struggle. Julia Cosway, the mother, claims that her son, John is insane and should be in an institution or drugged so that he functions like a zombie.

Kerstin, a native Swede, enters this household as a nurse and companion to John. Sensing something amiss in the household, she begins a diary and begins to listen for clues and possible answers. The foreboding builds as events develop which eventually lead to betrayal, estrangement, and murder. I like that Vine uses the labyrinth/minotaur as a metaphor. John was more comfortable in the labyrinth/library than anywhere else in the house, but Julia, his mother, was so desperate to keep him out of the labyrinth that she hid the key. She was the minotaur, the one who destroyed or devoured those around her. She was determined to manipulate and control her children.

Barbara Vine writes about the types of characters who stay with me after I close the book. I like that things aren't all tidy and as expected.

This is a fine mystery for a cozy night in by the fire.

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### **Martine Bailey says**

A wonderful re-read of a Barbara Vine classic, about a cool-minded, diary-keeping Swedish nurse, Kerstin Kvist, employed to care for John Cosway, an enigmatic, autistic man in his shabby English country house. All the other occupants are classic inhabitants of Vine-country – a family of snobbish, yet oddly vulnerable women who have a vested interest in the status quo of John's illness being preserved. Enter Felix, a sociopathically vile and egocentric artist whom the daughter of the house falls for, and we have the start of an explosive mix that ends in murder.

So much of the pleasure of this mystery is in the atmosphere of a foreigner incisively marvelling at a ghastly British middle class family and community, that I am happy to overlook a few oddities in the plot. This is the most self-consciously Gothic of Vine's novels, with references to *Jane Eyre* and the Gothic canon and all the tropes are played with delightfully – a dilapidated manor house, a labyrinthine library, various marriage proposals, and a 'mad man' in the attic as opposed to a woman. On a lighter note, Vine's presentation of food is as brilliantly wry as ever, as Kerstin records her horror at the lumpen British food she is served – ghastly cold bread and butter and tinned fish at tea-time and disgusting 'toad in the hole'. Yet aside from the black humour, there is genuine poignancy in the treatment of John and Kerstin's relationship. In particular, Vine skewers that peculiar sensation of a young person living amongst foreigners and seeing with a peculiar

sharpness that all is decidedly not as it should be. A wonderful treat.

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## Bionic Jean says

Barbara Vine is a pseudonym for the author Ruth Rendell, and under this nom de plume she publishes novels of psychological suspense. This one, **The Minotaur**, published in 2005, also has elements of modern Gothic horror. It was possibly written as a homage to traditional Gothic mystery stories.

The story is narrated by a young Swedish woman, Kerstin Kvist, who despite a lack of experience in psychiatric nursing, has decided to take a position as a nurse with the Cosway family at Lydstep Old Hall, a huge, old, crumbling mansion in the depths of Essex. This house is peopled with five dreadful, monstrous women and one man. The matriarch of the family is Julia Cosway, a tyrannical woman who takes an instant dislike to Kerstin, refusing even to pronounce her name properly. She does not believe that there is any need for a nurse at the Hall, only having taken Kerstin on at the insistence of her son, and immediately makes sure Kerstin is made aware of her opinions. She has four daughters, three of whom live with her permanently, plus her son John, a 39 year-old man who lives in a perpetual drug-induced haze. It is Kirsten's job to look after this man, although she doubts whether there is anything wrong with him. It becomes clear as the novel progresses that (view spoiler)

The action progresses extremely slowly. From the start the reader knows the reason for the book being written - because something terrible happened - but does not know exactly what it was. Over half the book passes before the event occurs, and by then it is blindingly obvious what is going to happen. Sometimes using this device leads to a pleasantly nail-biting, suspenseful read, but sometimes, if the events themselves are dreary and rather humdrum, it can seem an overlong preamble to an event which, when it does occur, is a bit of a damp squib. That, sadly, is what happens here.

*"The worst sound in the world broke that silence, not a scream but rather a long-drawn-out cry between a groan and a howl. No words, nothing human about it except that I knew it was human, the sound the tortured must make or those who have received the ultimate bad news."*

Yes, Barbara Vine can write. Not for nothing has she been made a peer of the realm. But by the time the reader arrives at those words, a lot of domestic detail, and squabbling female family feuds have had to be reckoned with. At times it reads more like a saga, except that the Gothic element is very evident, and in a way this makes it more difficult for the reader of a mystery to suspend their disbelief. The oppressive feeling Barbara Vine creates is conducive to a novel of suspense, but the overly melodramatic characters and situations, which would work so well in a Victorian novel, do not sit so well with a 1960's setting. *"There's madness in the family!"* announces one character, with apparent relish. Would anyone really say such a thing at that time?

The characters are grossly exaggerated types. There is the family matriarch, Julia, who disparages everyone; a bully who gets pleasure from dominating her adult children, and being generally disapproving of everything and everyone, ruling the house with an iron fist. Then there are her daughters. Her eldest daughter Ida Cosway serves the role of a housewife. She lives the life of a drudge, doing all the cooking and most of the cleaning, but without any money to do the job properly. In fact it is a mystery as to why the entire family seem to be poverty-stricken, with no money to do even basic repairs on the vast decaying edifice they live in, or keep it heated, or food on the table. The next daughter, Winifred Cosway, is a dowdy woman, a caterer by

trade, and destined to be a typical spinster - except that she has just become engaged to the vicar, Eric Dawson. Ella Cosway is an teacher, obsessed with pink and parties, although very much in thrall to her mother, as are the other sisters. She is the one person with whom Kerstin feels she might be able to develop a normal kind of relationship. The youngest Cosway daughter, Zorah, is originally an unknown quantity, (view spoiler).

Given this set of characters living in close confinement, unbearable tensions develop. The readers are only aware that it is set in the late sixties, by events outside Lydstep Old Hall. Within the house's confines are absurd constraints, such as phone calls being taken only at certain times of day, and other imposed petty rules and regulations redolent of any power-crazy megalomaniac in a gothic novel. Weeks - and pages - go by at Lydstep with little of consequence happening. Kerstin accompanies John on his daily walks, and the Cosway women are engrossed by various provincial happenings. Increasingly bitter quarrels and minor squabbles develop between Julia Cosway and her four grown daughters. Kerstin (conveniently for the reader) occupies her many free hours at the Hall making entries into her diary, conjecturing about John's real problems - if any, what lies behind the doors of the mysterious sealed rooms, and what was the reason for the family's impoverishment.

Yes, there is a tragedy. Secrets abound. There are sexual jealousies and obsessions, betrayals, menace, violence, psychiatric disorders, deceptions and a murder. But... it is rather dull and dreary. Because of the grossly exaggerated gothic elements, the novel suffers from having no convincing period feel. The claustrophobia is well induced, but overall there is a sense of unreality which does not seem to fit with the plot. Stephen King has referred to Barbara Vine as, *"The best suspense novelist with undercurrents of horror."* Agreed. But this one is strictly for those who already admire Barbara Vine. It's not one of her best.

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### **Misha Mathew says**

I will start by admitting that I am a shameless Barbara Vine/Ruth Rendell fan-girl. If you find me gushing about her books non-stop , please bear with me . Between the ages of 14-16 I was addicted to mysteries by Agatha Christie, P.D James and Elizabeth George. Then I discovered Ruth Rendell and the rest , as they, is history.

Ruth Rendell is one of the best mystery writers around and as Barbara Vine, she can be only described as "deadly" ! All the elements that make a perfect Gothic suspense are present here - feeling of menace, old mansion , sinister characters, madness running in the family and family secrets. The author knows how to spin a tale that will entice you to the book instantly. None of her books have disappointed me yet and I am glad to say neither did this one. However, I do admit that "The Minotaur" did not leave me speechless like her other novels - "Fatal Inversion" and "The Chimney-Sweeper's Boy". Yet this book was compelling enough to keep me awake for two nights in a row.

The characterization , like in all of the author's books, is flawless! The Cosway family are such an unforgettable set of characters. They mesmerise the reader and at the same time , they creep you out. Their secrets, their idiosyncrasies - all add up to the mystery and a sense of foreboding. Dysfunctional families are common in most of Barbara Vine's novels and the Cosway family are nothing but dysfunctional to the core - a domineering mother who doesn't seem to love any of her children and is hell-bent on proving her son to be a "lunatic", four sisters who behave like enemies and a son who is lost in his own world. Is he really "mad" as everyone says? What happened to turn him into what he is? As Kerstin discovers horrific truths about the family, the reader is plunged head-first into a web of lies, betrayal and manipulation that disturbs you and

enthral you at the same time. You keep getting the feeling there are worse things to come. Needless to say, the author's writing keep the pages turning.

Vine's novel's are not only haunting and engrossing , but they are so intelligently written. I can't stop gushing about her,really. You need to find out how talented she is yourself. The Minotaur is the perfect book for a cold winter night. For me,

Hot cup of coffee + a Barbara Vine novel = my idea of happiness :)

Something I have always admired about Barbara Vine is that her books are such astute psychological study of the dark side of human nature. At every page, you get the uneasy feeling of something terrible about to happen. She builds this entire atmosphere of secrets and suspense which is what makes her novels so addictive.Even after the last page is turned, the characters remain with you.

I don't think the author is even capable of writing a "bad" novel. Maybe I am biased. Maybe I am one of those fan-girls who are blind to any flaws the author's books might have. You can always go and check for other reviews but I assure you can't go wrong with a Barbara Vine novel.

Quotes:

"There's madness in the family." The expression was old-fashioned then if not yet politically incorrect, but she repeated it. "Yes, madness in the family." When people say this phrasing it in various ways, they always sound pleased about this genetic inheritance.

Why is it that sculpted or carved faces, when seen by night in a half-lit place, have a frightening effect while effigies of animals or artefacts do not? No one expects the lion on a tomb to raise its head but everyone of an imaginative turn of mind fears that the human head in stone may turn, the lips part or twist into a snarl.

The worst sound in the world broke that silence, not a scream but rather a long-drawn-out cry between a groan and a howl.No words, nothing human about it except that I knew it was human, the sound the tortured must make or those who have received the ultimate bad news.

Overall:

To quote The Independent - "..... vintage wine from the Rendell Vine"

Recommended?

Yes! If you love mystery/suspense and haven't read Barbara Vine/Ruth Rendell, you are missing out on some really good books.

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### **Loretta says**

I wanted to like this book. I was much influenced by the "reviews" noted on the back cover by other good mystery writers. I will be forewarned next time.

I wanted to like this book also because I am looking for another writer I can read as a series. This won't be one.

The pace is glacial - OK, I get it that she is developing the characters. But she never provided any reason to like or sympathize with anyone in the story, even the main character. Everyone just plods along to the almost inevitable conclusion - pain and misery.

OK - don't read this part - it is a spoiler.

In the first chapter Kirsten, thirty years later, runs into Ella. She is somehow unaware of Ella's life story after

her earlier involvement with that whole family. How this can be, I do not know, given that her mother-in-law lives in the same neighborhood. But somehow or other she is totally unaware that Ella married the vicar. Even if her mother-in-law was being particularly discreet ( a characteristic that she did not demonstrate in the story ), wouldn't you think that a person so involved in a family's tragedy would somehow over the years have some idea of what happened to them?

I read some reviews of the audio version of this book - I wish I had had access to that.

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### **Jess The Bookworm says**

Kerstin arrives in a little English town to assist a family to care for their mentally ill son/brother. When she arrives, she realises that something is not right. John, the man she is meant to be looking after is not quite what he seems.

What follows is a "modern" day gothic novel set in the 1960s, complete with the old house with secrets, including a labyrinth in the library, and a family that is hiding their true nature.

The title is perhaps a bit misleading, as there is nothing supernatural or other-worldly about this book. It's a metaphor.

I really enjoyed the journey that this book took me on, and I especially enjoyed the "voice" of the main character Kerstin. I will definitely be on the look out to read more of Ruth Rendell's books in the future.

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### **Gail says**

Barbara Vine is the pen name that Ruth Rendell uses when writing psychological thrillers as opposed to the regular who-dunnits. Her Barbara Vine books are more 'why-dunnits' and 'what-was-actually-dun' type novels.

I read the first three Barbara Vine novels years ago, and enjoyed them very much. I read this one because I heard it had a character with Aspergers, and I was curious to see how he would be portrayed.

The novel is told from the viewpoint of a young Swedish woman called Kerstin (pronounced Shashtin), who comes to England to work for the Cosway family as some kind of nurse for their son John, whom they think is schizophrenic (as no one had heard of Aspergers back then). Her fresh, down-to-earth manner and forthrightness and independence contrast with the weird suppressed dynamics of this very dysfunctional family - a widowed mother of 85, and her middle-aged children, all girls except John.

Barbara Vine novels switch between the present and the past, starting with a present situation in which something happens to trigger a memory of the past situation, which is then told and mysteries are unearthed, and then the present is returned to and something new is learnt. So the novel starts with Kerstin in her 60s, and she happens upon a member of the Cosway family at an art gallery, and then after that she tells the story of what happened, and eventually returns to the present.

In this case, it actually reminded me a little of Wuthering Heights (and Kerstin does frequently draw on her

knowledge of Victorian literature and compares her position as governess with what she knows of novels like Jane Eyre), because you have a narrator who is quite detached from it all, and in the position of a sort of 'servant' to a family which is full of odd and warped passions. It is very cleverly done, and Kerstin changes throughout the book, being affected by the poor treatment of her by Mrs Cosway and becoming less confident to stand up for herself.

I really enjoyed the character descriptions and developments - and this is mainly what a psychological thriller focuses on. I was a bit frustrated by the fact that Kerstin often talks (to the reader) about how people with Aspergers are literally unable ever to imagine how another person is feeling, because this is simply not true. But I know this was traditionally thought, and I suppose it's what Ruth Rendell thought at the time she wrote it (although it was only 2005, so not long ago). Other than Kerstin's 'explanations' to the reader about Aspergers, which are old-fashioned and inaccurate, the actual depiction of John as a character, in his behaviour, is very accurate.

One thing I thought was odd is the complete lack of humour in Kerstin's style, considering she's a cartoonist. She is an observer of people, which a cartoonist would be, but she doesn't show any sense of humour or instinct to amuse that one might expect of a cartoonist (well, I expected, anyway!). Even though obviously she is telling a story that is ultimately unpleasant, there are plenty of parts that could have been depicted in a humorous way, especially considering she is looking back as she is describing.

The book did seem to drag in the middle - the Cosway family do become tiresome when continuously being described in great detail. What really disappointed me was the fact that nothing in the book surprised me - I figured out what was going to happen, and there was no sense of the shock and astonishment that I used to get from Vine's novels. This could be because I'm now older than I was when I used to read her, and also because I have observed the kind of plot twists and ploys and uses and so it's very easy to spot the clues and predict.

Interestingly, the ending was ambiguous. I mean, I think you are supposed to read between the lines, but I'd figured it out before anyway, so I was expecting some kind of more obvious revelation at the end. But the ending seemed no more obvious than the things that this character had said earlier in the book.

In all, though, I think I liked it. The characters stick in my head. I would like to read it again sometime.

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### **Kellie says**

Barbara Vine is the pen name of Ruth Rendell. This was a very interesting book. It takes place in a small country village in England back in the 60's. The narrator is Kerstin (pronounced Shastan in Swedish). She takes a caretaking job at a house called Lydstep Old Hall. It is a large house totally covered by vines. Kerstin is to help take care of the son of the family, John, who supposedly has schizophrenia. The mother and 3 daughters live in the house as well. The family is on the extreme side of dysfunctional. John is the sole heir to the family fortune. Kerstin suspects he is being drugged by the mother so that she and her daughters can live in the house and stay in control of the family affairs. The mother makes "Mommie Dearest" look good. Kerstin finds out the family doctor is actually Mrs. Cosway's lover. And she suspects Zorah, one of the daughters, is their daughter. The Doctor is the one who provides the drugs Mrs. Cosway feeds John. When he dies, and John comes off the drug, Kerstin realizes he was terribly misdiagnosed. More like autism than madness. The daughters, Ella, Winnifred, Ira and Zorah all have their own idiosyncrasies. Ella falls in love with a local artist who is like the town tramp and really could care less about her. Winnifred is engaged to the

local minister but his having sex with the artist on the side. Ida is more like the family cook than a daughter. Zorah, who doesn't live with the family, has her own fortune and waves it in front of her sisters and mother like a carrot. The question that I pondered thru out the book was why Kerstin stayed with this family as long as she did. The mother was extremely hateful and it was obvious John didn't need her. It is almost like she stuck around to see what the family would do next. There was a lot of foreshadowing where she set the scene for the final climax towards the end. I think a little too much. The anticipation was killing me and there were parts that dragged a little. All in all, this book was suspenseful and definitely kept my interest. It was a unique story line and I was satisfied with the resolution at the end. The good ones survived and seemed to live better lives, the bad ones got their comeuppance.

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## Blair says

I really had *no idea* what to read first in 2015. I actually felt like I had the reader's equivalent of writer's block, especially when reading others' blog posts and tweets about how the first book of the year should be some significant, symbolic choice that would set the tone for the year to come. I eventually chose *The Minotaur* almost randomly while reorganising books on my Kindle, feeling it would strike some balance between the 'light' sort of stuff I actually felt like reading, and my vague aim to read a greater range of books (those published prior to the last couple of years, those written by authors I haven't read before). (In any case, I ended up finishing *Poor Souls' Light* first, even though I started it after this one.)

The story begins with Kerstin, the narrator, bumping into an old acquaintance while on holiday. This is Ella Cosway, a member of the formidable family Kerstin came to know in the 1960s, when - aged 24, recently arrived in the UK from Sweden, and newly qualified as a nurse - she spent a year working as carer to Ella's brother, John. After this introduction, the majority of the book is told as a flashback to that time, albeit always from the perspective of Kerstin's present-day self, which results in a lot of foreshadowing, a lot of 'of course, I couldn't have known then...' sort of stuff.

The Cosway family consists of matriarch Julia (usually referred to simply as Mrs Cosway), four middle-aged daughters, three of whom - Ida, Winifred and Ella - live at home, and John. The latter, Kerstin's 'charge', is vaguely defined as 'mentally ill' and sometimes referred to by the family as schizophrenic. The other daughter, Zorah, is a wealthy widow who occasionally descends on the family home, Lydstep Old Hall, to hold parties and bestow expensive gifts. With John's care dominated by Mrs Cosway, Kerstin finds herself acting as more of a live-in companion to the sisters, observing their life in the village of Windrose. The place and its inhabitants seem perpetually suspended in a much earlier time, with everything revolving around the church, village gossip, and the excitement among unmarried women whenever a new man turns up - it's all much more Jane Austen than swinging sixties. In the midst of this, Kerstin is a fish out of water in more ways than one.

Kerstin reminded me so much of someone I used to know, even the specifics of many of her conversational asides and the things that interested her about other people, that she almost instantly came to life for me and remained a strong, vivid, very real presence throughout the story. How much of this was down to Vine's characterisation and how much was due to me making that personal connection, I'm not sure. Once the comparison was in my head, I found it difficult to detach my perception of Kerstin from existing ideas about the person I couldn't help imagining her to be.

*The Minotaur* may be widely described as a gothic thriller, suspense/mystery etc, but readers expecting it to have the pace typical to the modern incarnations of those genres might find it a letdown. The story does

gradually build to a catastrophic event, which is clearly signposted from the beginning, and it's full of references to gothic novels and sinister symbols, but the bulk of the book involves Kerstin simply observing the Cosways' lives and their family politics. The slow burn made it fascinating to me, and I actually really enjoyed reading about the family, but I can totally understand why some other reviewers have dismissed it as boring: the narrative can be repetitive and occasionally lapses into dullness, sometimes feeling as if it's been deliberately stretched out to fulfil a required word count. Kerstin repeats, and repeats again, her observations on members of the Cosway family; some of these facts (Winifred wears too much makeup, Ella has dirty nails) are stated so many times that they feel burned into my memory. (However, I'm not sure whether this is more a deliberately engineered feature of Kerstin's character than padding to make the story longer. The fact that she lacks the obvious eccentricity of the Cosways doesn't mean she is beyond reproach, and she sometimes comes off as quite petty.)

Slow-moving it may be, but I found *The Minotaur* absorbing. As a portrait of a 'dysfunctional' family, it's as carefully detailed as an intricately embroidered tapestry. A dramatic finale wasn't even necessary for my enjoyment of the book to be complete, so when it did come, I was relieved to find it didn't disturb the equilibrium of the rest of the narrative. Not for everyone, I wouldn't recommend it universally, but this was a good book to start the year off for me.

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### **Sharon says**

I'm a narrative junkie, so I read a lot of mysteries and SF. Barbara Vine/Ruth Rendell is one of my consistent favorites, and *The Minotaur* doesn't disappoint. In addition to a compelling story, Vine does a wonderful job with atmosphere, conveying a very real sense of "something just ain't right." A quick, absorbing read.

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