



My Cleaner

Maggie Gee

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"My cleaner. She does my dirty work. She knows more about me than anyone else in the world. But does she, in fact, like me? Does her presence fill me with shame?"

Ugandan Mary Tendo worked for many years in the white middle-class Henman household in London, cleaning for Vanessa and looking after her only child, Justin. More than ten years after Mary has left, Justin — now twenty-two, handsome and gifted — is too depressed to get out of bed. To his mother's surprise, he asks for Mary. When Mary responds to Vanessa's cry for help and returns from Uganda to look after Justin, the balance of power in the house shifts dramatically. Both women's lives change irrevocably as tensions build towards a startling climax on a snowbound motorway.

Maggie Gee confronts racism and class conflict with humour and tenderness in this engrossing read.

Maggie Gee was chosen as one of Granta's original 'Best Young British Novelists'. She has published many novels to great acclaim, including *The White Family*, which was shortlisted for the 2002 Orange Prize for Fiction and for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award 2004; and *The Flood*, which was longlisted for the 2004 Orange Prize. She has also published *My Cleaner*, *My Driver*, *The Ice People* and *My Animal Life* with Telegram. *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* is her latest novel.

Maggie was the first female Chair of the Royal Society of Literature, 2004-2008, and is now one of its Vice-Presidents. She lives in London.

My Cleaner Details

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From Reader Review My Cleaner for online ebook

Emma says

Vanessa's twenty-something son has depression and won't leave his bedroom. Vanessa writes to Justin's former nanny, Mary Tendo, who is back home in Uganda and asks her to come and care for him. This novel tells the story of Mary's second stay in London in the Henman household.

This book is a really enjoyable read, especially Vanessa and Mary's reflections on each other. The truth of the matter that they simply do not understand one another's point of view makes a really good read.

I like the way the majority of the book unfolds too. As the book progresses it is clear that Vanessa herself is perhaps not so stable as she would have the world around her believe and is battling her own demons.

Mary's (seemingly) straight forward and honest approach is entertaining in itself. Her world view fascinating. I was a little disappointed that the story ends when it does, unresolved in many ways. I would have liked to carry on reading about the characters' lives.

Josie Crimp says

I really enjoyed this novel. It combines some interesting, entertaining characters with some biting comments on social niceties. I'd recommend it to pretty much everyone I know who likes reading...

Carolknitnat says

I really enjoyed this book. Brilliant characters especially Mary Tendo. I love the different cultural or personal assumptions each makes about the others and the fact that they all have their own flaws. The descriptions of Ugandan life were vivid and interesting. I shall definitely recommend this one.

Denise Kruse says

Love this book! I traveled London via Uganda via the irrepressible Mary Tendo, a character I will long remember. The central theme is the use and abuse of Mary as cheap labor; however, Mary has a few failings of her own. She is no innocent victim. She and her employer, Vanessa, have a tense, competitive relationship regarding everything from the men in their lives to their work. Yet there's more! Just when it feels lightweight and wickedly humorous, it weaves into really heavy stuff. All the characters and locations are depicted colorfully. Definitely reading more of Maggie Gee.

Robert says

A very easy, fast read, this book lives and breathes for its Ugandan character, Mary Tendo. Having lived and worked in London (and other cities and countries), she starts the novel back in Uganda, settled and in charge of a linen room in a hotel. A letter arrives, offering her a job if she returns to London, where the now-adult

son of the woman whose cleaner/nanny she had been, many years earlier, has suffered a mental breakdown. She's asked to return, to help him heal.

Mary Tendo is the momentum and the heart and soul of this novel. The other characters are... dubious. Vanessa Henman, her employer, is reprehensible to the point of caricature. Hypocritical, self-absorbed, egocentric, racist, controlling, arrogant, bitter and petty with a self-image that is self-sacrificing, equanimous, tolerant, generous... basically, a vile person who thinks very highly of herself. Her son is a messed up crybaby who love-hates his mother, and the way his breakdown is portrayed feels about as inauthentic as it could possibly be. He is portrayed as so dysfunctional that it is not credible he could ever have been functional. The ex-husband is Mr Nice, the creative writing students are screaming cliches... basically, aside from Mary Tendo, all characters are cardboard, and none of them convincing.

It is a little odd, like reading an animated movie with one human character in it (like Space Jam or Song of the South), where the one human character is a Ugandan black woman, and she's stuck in a posh cartoon Britain.

The story tries to preserve its universality by only naming big things: London, Uganda, Kampala. Mary and Vanessa both hail from villages, which remain unnamed, sketched in only the vaguest terms (leading to a weird awkwardness when Vanessa's home village is visited, and it keeps being referred to as 'the village' while all the big cities were named). There are mobile phones in the book, but other than that it seems to have been written out of time - is it set in the 1990s, 2000s? People write letters; there appears to be no internet, or it is unimportant and no part of people's lives. Maybe the book is set in the second half of the 1990s, when laptops and mobiles co-existed without the web being the be-all and end-all of communications.

Sometimes, the book does not quite follow its own logic: someone working hard and saving up £3000 for lots of blood, sweat and tears is unlikely to let her boyfriend fly over from Uganda (which presumably would cost £600-800 or so).

The book also seems oddly inconsistent: sometimes it's told in third person, close to either Mary or Vanessa. Sometimes it's in first person. Some scenes drift close to one viewpoint character after another.

Basically, this is a book with a colourful, three dimensional main character, stuck in a two-dimensional world with clunky writerly craftsmanship around the edges.

It's brisk and entertaining, but not terribly rewarding or enjoyable to read. (The British characters sap all the joy from it...)

Jeannette says

Difficult to rate this properly because I'm prejudiced. I lived in East Africa for nearly 30 years and feel I know a bit about Uganda (Tanzania mostly, and Kenya). Mary Tendo was a fairly good character for a modern urban Ugandan woman BUT, and this is the hard part, the whole scene in London was sick! Maybe the author wanted to portray the saneness and good heartedness of African natures in contrast to the screwed up nutty people with disturbed relationships in London. But that theme got lost in the constant mystery of the relationship of mad mother and her neurotic son. That was hard to "grok". Then toss in the benign father and Mary Tendo and the mix just didn't work, rather like trying to mix eggs, clay, sugar, vinegar, rose water and duck feathers to make a cake. The writing wasn't very good and although I read on and on I grew less and

less happy with the tale that seemed without any flavor or substance that could sustain the many stock or unbelieveable situations.

Seher Andaç says

Çok güzel... Kimin hikayesiymi anlat?lan? Neden bu kadar tan?d?k... Yarat?c? yazarl?k atölyesinden f?rlam?? gibi yaz?lm?? ve üstelik kapa?? kafam?n tas?n? att?rm?? olsa da arkada? bildi?im karakterlerini özleyece?im....

Sally says

"She and Vanessa are not so different. In some ways they are almost the same"

By sally tarbox on 2 January 2018

Format: Kindle Edition

Maybe 2.5* for a readable, if really rather silly, bit of chick-lit.

Vanessa is a lecturer in Creative Writing and rather a sloane ranger type, with her materialistic, fashionable London life. But her 22 year old son Justin is lying in bed with some sort of breakdown, and Vanessa invites her old cleaner, who helped bring him up, back to the home from Uganda, to help.

And so the stage is set for an implausible tale. Inevitable tensions between Vanessa - unpleasant, stingy, jealous - and Mary - forced to occupy a subordinate role, but very much her own person.

The glimpses of Mary's life in Uganda were quite interesting, but I just didn't buy the interplay of the two women.

Douglas says

A complex though light novel. The characters are well drawn and Maggie Gee writes sympathetically about all of them, even though most of them do not come across as particularly nice people to know! And it is certainly about time that a good book has been written about the relationship between someone in England and a cleaner who has travelled from the developing world to work in the UK. I also recommend the sequel, My Driver.

Ana Paula says

Um livro que não me prendeu, por vezes gera até tédio.

Algo de surreal, algo de paranóico, não é o meu estilo de leitura, definitivamente.

Foi difícil ir em frente mas consegui chegar ao fim.

Ailsa Britain says

I enjoyed this enormously - great characters and a nice combination of amusing and thought provoking.

Christine says

I enjoyed this. I especially enjoyed that the writer did not give in to the temptation, if temptation there was, to clear up the myriad misunderstandings and complete lack of real empathy between the characters. They knew each other and yet knew nothing of the other. Vanessa has no insight into herself. There are tremors where a breakthrough seems possible but She is 'strong' and manages to deflect, ignore or distract herself when reality starts to creep in. And Mary, much more grounded as she is, can fail absolutely to understand what might be happening to Vanessa. A classic example of this is the scene when Vanessa is attacked in her study by a student and Mary thinks he is after her money. At no time does either woman realize the story behind the others experience and reaction. Funny and sad.

And yet, as in life, they manage to move on with the mountain of misunderstandings and resentments always pushed out of the way. For the time being.

Tracey Wilde says

Really enjoyed this. Funny and light hearted but with complicated relationships and really well written rounded characters. Can't wait to read 'My Driver' by the same author

Marguerite Kaye says

Another Kindle Daily Deal, and one that really didn't work for me - in fact, I gave up not even half way through. My main gripe, which seems to have been my consistent gripe over a few books recently, is that I found all of the protagonists either tedious or unlikeable. I didn't hate them, but I really couldn't have cared less what happened to them, and to be honest, I found Mary's constant 'I'll tell you about my son, but it's too awful so I won't tell you yet' had the opposite effect of wanting to make me keep reading.

There was quite a mix of styles, varying points of view, and swapping between first and third person. I liked this at first, but then I began to see it as too much of a device, and not enough of a 'letting me in' to the protagonists heads. I've seen lots of other reviewers say that this was funny, but again, I found the humour contrived, and frankly in places it made me cringe a bit, it verged on the patronising - especially when it came to portraying Mary's blend of naivety and shrewdness. And As for her employer - too much of a caricature for me.

Did I read this completely wrongly? Was it me who had the sense of humour by-pass when I was reading this? It's possible. Once again, as in recent reviews, I seem to be in the minority. I think I might stop taking risks on KDDs for a while though.

Maggie says

Bought as a Kindle Daily Deal, this is story of one-time nanny and cleaner Ugandan Mary Tendo. At age 38 she returns to England, after a gap of 10 years or so, to care for the now grown-up Justin Henman.

The background descriptions of Uganda (of which I knew nothing beforehand) are interesting and the author starkly and cleverly contrasts the two cultures. Bizarrely there's a single mention of Donald Trump in the middle of the book (purely as an example of a mega-rich man, the book was first published in 2005). Other "celebrities" such as Idi Amin (who Mary says "was a terrible man, but also very funny"), Queen Elizabeth and Ernest Hemingway also get brief mentions.

I didn't really warm to any of the characters. If I had to pick a favourite, I suppose it would be Mary or possibly Tigger (Justin's absent father, Trevor). Mary's employer, Vanessa Henman, is quite hideous but you can't help feeling sorry for her.

It's probably down to my poor sense of humour but I found little to amuse me. The relationships between Mary and Justin, and indeed Justin and his mother, appeared distasteful to me.

The ending has a little 'surprise' which I'd already guessed from the clues scattered down earlier. Although I'd question the timings involved to make the 'surprise' work!

A frustrating but strangely compulsive read that took me ages to get into and almost as long to get out the other end! I do feel as if I should give Maggie Gee another go though - will keep an eye out for her in the KDDs!
