



The Rehearsal

Eleanor Catton

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All the world's a stage - and nowhere is it that more true than at an all-girls high school, particularly one where a scandal has just erupted. When news spreads of a high school teacher's relationship with his underage student, participants and observers alike soon take part in an elaborate show of concern and dismay. But beneath the surface of the teenage girls' display, there simmers a new awareness of their own power. They obsessively examine the details of the affair with the curiosity, jealousy, and approbation native to any adolescent girl, under the watchful eye of their stern and enigmatic saxophone teacher, whose focus may not be as strictly on their upcoming recital as she implies.

The Rehearsal Details

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From Reader Review The Rehearsal for online ebook

Colin Bruce Anthes says

I enjoy rating and seeing ratings on Goodreads immensely, however I can't help but notice certain patterns in the ratings of books which you, no doubt, have also noticed. Classics and non-genre-protected contemporary novels can either be skyrocketed by a large fan base, or pulled down by instant 1 and 2 star ratings by people who don't find a book to be in keeping with their ideas of what literature should be. I would love to see more raters giving good books 3 or 4 stars even if it wasn't their cup of tea, just for the sake of others on Goodreads. More accurate ratings can only help in the never-ending pursuit of good literature.

Here is a book with only a 3.3 rating that is really quite a fine work. It is stylized, and apt to throw a reader quickly who isn't open to this kind of prose. Had it not been stylized, however, the subject matter would have been typical contemporary sexual sensationalism, teen hormones and angst. Instead, Eleanor Catton wrote chapter after chapter that one can invest in. One can invest in the plot, the characters, the intense cutting atmosphere, and the words themselves. The Rehearsal is a domestic story that manages to get the blood pumping like a thriller. The book teetered between a 4 and 5 star rating from me until the very last line, which tweaked the novel (emotionally; not with a plot twist) and made the complete book reverberate with meaning. I was truly impacted. Do not let the 3.3 rating fool you. This is a splendid read.

Elizabeth says

This book certainly wouldn't appeal to everyone, and to be honest I'm not yet quite sure what I've just read.

But it was really fucking beautiful.

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

That One Perfect Kiss

At the heart of this novel (written when Catton was 22) is an illicit male teacher, female pupil relationship.

We hear little from the 31 year old teacher, so we can't determine whether he is a latter-day Humbert Humbert.

Catton is more interested in the context and the aftermath than the act itself.

Almost all of the novel is told from the perspective of secondary school girls or young women. Hence, it's primarily an exploration of *female adolescence and maturity*, whatever the sexual orientation. It's almost as if the forbidden relationship is just one of many available options.

The girls aren't naive or prudish. They understand the nature of the males they are dealing with: *"Sleeping with a minor isn't exciting because you get to boss them around. It's exciting because you're risking so*

much...It's the possibility you might lose that gets you excited."

Any sense of Puritanism derives purely (if not impurely) from the mothers, who seek to live vicariously through their private school daughters: ***"I want my daughter to experience what was denied to me."***

You have to wonder whether their expectations might include a little scandal. They push their daughters from clarinet to saxophone, because it's a "sexier" instrument.

School lessons are not enough. Private tuition abounds. Innocence is transitional. The trappings of adolescence - experimentation, flirtation, courtship, intimacy, narcissism, voyeurism, damage, guilt and gossip - are all a rehearsal for maturity.

We must all progress from innocence to experience, to some it seems, the sooner, the better: *"This little taste your daughter has had is a taste of what could be. She's swallowed it. It's inside her now."*

Alternating with the girls' story is a narrative concerning first year Drama Institute students: *"Theatre is a concentrate of life as normal...It isn't a perfect copy of real life. It's just a point of access...things are made present."*

Actors attempt to perform like real people, they role-play, just as adolescents pretend to be adults. Life is a theatre of pretension and cruelty. We need protection, so we use both our own face and a mask. ***We adopt both a guise and a disguise.***

We are individuals, but we are social animals: *"We are speaking a language, you and I together, a language that we did not invent, a language that is not unique to our uttering."*

Like actors in a play, *"we are speaking someone else's lines. It's a comfort."* The novel is heavily informed by semiotics, feminism, structuralism and literary theory. Yet these academic influences are transformed into beautiful prose: *"Many of us fear women. We are afraid of woman as woman, longing for her as virgin or as Madonna or as whore. It is not by becoming a woman that we will address this fear. **It is by becoming the things she touches, the spaces she moves through, the fractured gestures that are not signs in themselves but are nonetheless hers and thus a part of her.** If we discover the weight of these small things, then she will appear not as an idea but as a life and a totality."*

The narratives develop in different tenses, one past, the other present. Catton messes around with time, sometimes telling us the effect, before we learn the cause. It works, though, because we learn by accretion as we accumulate *"the weight of these small things,"* each of them elegantly and eloquently composed.

Beauty itself is not a product of youth. It is equally present in maturity: *"There are qualities of beauty that were unique to women, qualities that teenage girls could not possess: kindness lines around the eyes and mouth, a certain settling of the body, a weariness of poise and pose that was indefinably sexual."*

The dialogue is authentic, if sometimes abstract; the prose is observant, subtle and exquisite.

Sexual attraction is not solely heterosexual. Taboos are broken. Attraction is a primary emotion, guilt only secondary. Desire is always at work. The gaze never ceases. We look hard, so that we can learn.

Catton notices things that a male (apart from Thomas Mann perhaps) might miss, like ***"the soft notched hollow of her collarbone."***

Apart from Nabokov, the author who most comes to mind is Virginia Woolf: this novel has the narrative drive of *"Mrs Dalloway"*: *"In years to come...[she will] come to know her body's tides and tolls and can say, 'This is frustration' and 'This is longing, a nostalgic longing that draws me back to a time before'...Who must I be in love with, to feel this pull?"*

The two stories flow inexorably towards a common destination, a performance, a recital, when perspectives combine, and yin and yang embrace, at which point the novel becomes most Proustian in its concerns: *"I could only ever tell you how I remember it, never how it was."*

Still, memory will always take us back to a singular moment: *"That moment...That one perfect kiss. It's all there is. Everything from this point onward is only going to be a facsimile, darling. You will try and re-create that one kiss with all your lovers...but in the end you will never really be able to touch it, this perfect memory, this one solitary moment of unknowing where you were simply innocent of who you were, of what you might become."*

While I haven't yet read *"The Luminaries"*, Catton's second novel, I strongly recommend that you read this exemplary novel first. Witness her emergence before you become engrossed with what she has since become.

SOUNDTRACK:

Sonny Rollins - "You Don't Know What Love Is"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nn6VFG...>

k.d. lang - "Constant Craving"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oXqPjx...>

Jill Sobule - "I Kissed A Girl"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FdwUG...>

Katy Perry - "I Kissed A Girl"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tAp9BK...>

Paul Bryant says

Since this book is partly about a bunch of teenagers trying to get accepted into a top dramatic academy, I have an excuse to tell you a recent sad-but-true anecdote, which featured my daughter's fellow-Corridor (that's their band) named Helena. If you've seen the youtube videos (and they really want you to!) she's the

very tall, very thin, quite pretty and extremely blonde one. She's a good actress (I've seen her in school plays) and a good singer & dancer and she's totally in love with acting. So with all that going on she thought she'd be able to get into a top dramatic academy. (This is the frantic year when they're all applying to university). So she went to the first audition. She's been used to acting & performing with a lot of different types of kids, it's an extremely mixed school. The casts of all the shows she's ever been in (a lot) have been black, brown, short, tall, all kinds of kids, all jazzed with acting like some kids are. When she came back from the first audition she was devastated. She was thinking : I'm sunk, I'll have to think of something else. Why ? Because when she walked into the room and met the other wannabe actors, they were *all extremely tall extremely thin extremely blonde pretty 18 year old girls*. No one else had applied. The whole room was full of Helenas.

I thought I'd read *The Rehearsal* because I just didn't fancy the 2000-page-long *Luminaries*, all the reviews gave me the idea it was a little bit too meta, a gigantic brainy well-written shaggy-dog story, or maybe a shaggy-god story, which would be worse. So I thought, let's try the first slender novel instead. Maybe that will inspire me. But it uninspired me.

This story has two parts to it. The kids auditioning for the academy is one and the scandal of a girl being sexually abused by her music teacher is another. Both of these plot strands are groanworthy, especially the latter, because we have had a lot of this kind of thing in the history of fiction. *Tampa*, *Notes on a Scandal*, *Innocents*, heck, it's a sub-division of fiction :

<http://www.maryse.net/books/book-reco...>

Here it's the psychological aftermath of the abuse rather than the thing itself, but still, you get to wear the been there done that t shirt.

Dull subjects can be made into great novels, everyone knows that. Look at *Ulysses* – guys wander about Dublin and drink in pubs. Molly Bloom shags her boyfriend. End of story. For 900 pages. Look at *Moby Dick*. Boy meets whale, boy loses whale, boy can't take no for an answer and pursues whale. For 900 pages. Look at Jean Rhys's four novels – woman mopes around. That's it. But this one.... I could tell Eleanor Catton could turn a deft phrase and make many astringent observations, but I just didn't want 300 pages of deft phrases & astringent observations about teenagers and their trembling psyches and undulating nether regions. Not right now, and maybe never.

Justin Evans says

Eleanor Catton is a witch. I say this out of great respect, as I was taught to do by my Fake Auntie Barbara, who is also a witch. I know that Catton is a witch because:

i) I do not care about sexuality in fiction. It's been done to death (primarily, I suspect, because it lets writers, who like to think they're pure as the driven snow, feel like victims. Most writers, of course, are wealthy beyond the wildest dreams of the rest of the human population and got that way because of a wide range of historical injustices). It lets writers think they have something interesting to say about The Human Condition when they have nothing to say about actual human lives.

ii) I don't much care about coming of age novels, because most teenagers are dull, repetitive, irritating and more or less subhuman. The ones that aren't don't act like teenagers, and coming of age novels involving them are thus weird and not really coming of age novels.

iii) I do not believe the whole world's a stage.

iv) With few exceptions, I don't like jazz.

So Catton has written a coming of age novel, which is primarily about sexuality and The Theater, and focuses on the symbolism of jazz saxophones. You'll note that, despite all this, I really liked this book.

But there is more evidence still. There are books, good books, which are unreadable for the first x chapters. Consider Catch 22, which I at least found boring and baffling for the first 100 pages... and then fell for, hard, as hard as a teenage saxophonist. Or Death in Venice, which did nothing for me for about the first third, but so much for me in the last two thirds that I've gone on to read Dr Faustus *twice*. And I'm not at all masochistic. Mann just does it.

The Rehearsal is an outlier even on this scale, though. For the first 200--200!--pages, I was mostly put off. I had no desire to keep reading. The two narratives seemed to have nothing to do with each other; the stylistic fireworks grew tired quickly (about half of the book takes place somewhere between reality and a saxophone teacher's perception of that reality, which is symbolized by characters being lit as if on stage); points i) through iv) had been firmly established. I figured I'd finish it, because it was shortish and the Luminaries is apparently the greatest shit ever. But I was just as likely to play video games as pick the book up.

And then the two narratives came together and I became a lunatic obsessive about finishing the book. My wife typically asks how a book was once I'm done, and I say things like "It was good, except for x, y and z, and I don't think the author put enough thought into a, and I don't know. I liked it okay." That's the books I really like. And she says, "Are you going to read [author's other book]?" "Maybe. Not right now."

But with The Rehearsal, the conversation went like this:

"How was it?"

"Great."

"Huh. Are you going to read the Luminaries?"

"Yes. You should read this. It's really great."

Enough beating my chest. Why is it so good? Well, Catton takes those tired topics and, implausibly, makes something new from them by looking at how adults perceive teenage coming of age sexuality, how they/we exploit it, distort it, and impose our own codes and experiences on the young.

She writes about being a teenage boy more touchingly than any ex-teenage boy (for them, apparently, life was mostly about The Penis. For me, as for Catton's young man, life was about substantially more important things, as well as learning to cope with aforementioned Penis).

She writes with awareness of the constructedness of her own fiction (i.e., the book is a stage), but without any suggestion that the constructedness of it makes it less valid. It's almost as if the constructedness is something to enjoy, because it makes it possible to tell truths about the non-fictional world (in the case of this book: that growing up is akin to rehearsing for the outside world, i.e., it is not the case that all the world's a stage at all, it's far more terrible than that, and you should revel in the moments when you can act out

fictions).

And she writes about homosexuality, without Writing About Homosexuality. It's just that between one and three of her characters would rather make out with someone of their own gender. If that's an issue for you, that's on you. The book does not care about your stupid issues, though it does care very much about the way the world treats those one to three characters (i.e., shabbily). I grant you, that sounds weird. Almost as if it's hard to explain using reason.

Almost as if the author is a witch.

Basuhi says

*Silently seductive and unapologetically bold, a novel that carefully ensnares poetic opulence and exquisite exposition, **The Rehearsal** is.*

"Remember that it's in her best interests for everything to go wrong. It's in her best interests to slip up now, while she's still safe in the Green Room with the shrouded furniture and the rows of faceless polystyrene heads and the cracked and dusty mirrors and the old papers scudding across the floor. Don't wait until she's out in the savage white light of the floods, where everyone can see. Let her practice everything in a safe environment, with a helmet and kneepads and packed lunches, and you at the end of the hall with the door cracked open a dark half-inch in case anyone cries out in the long hours of the night."

Very rarely does a book impinge upon the surface of morality, *disgust* me and *embarrass* me and still manage to intrigue me; *convince* me of it's echoing verity with a startlingly vicarious precision. This is just one of those.

As the hopelessness of blurbs go, this one is eerily reminiscent of every critical contemporary gone wrong but it's more than right about the situation in the book : *All the world's a stage—and nowhere is it that more true than at an all-girls high school, particularly one where a scandal has just erupted.*

There was something so very endearing about it, right back in the beginning. The way she played it, out of a textbook, big moon eyes and an open collar, and her skirt hitched up to show her knee. It was so touchingly amateur. It was like a child's painting, imperfect and discordant and poorly executed and crying out to be celebrated, to be pinned to the wall or the fridge, to be complimented and fawned over and adored."

I'll just reiterate a fact here. Scandal is one of the best (and the worst) thing to bombard the monotony of a school to smithereens. It's not easy to forget the furor, the unending furor of shameless gossips. When speculations run amok and apocryphal theories bud to satiate the hunger of knowing more, or seeming to know more than others.

The book, let me clarify, is not about the scandal itself but rather the happenings that follow, a game of perspectives and theories; a game of dominoes and that's what truly sets it apart. This is where, in my opinion, the aforementioned opulence of this book lies.

The story diverges into two parts very soon : One, the aftershocks of the scandalous affair and two, a local drama institute student trying on the chameleonic skin of an actor for the first time. How these two would coalesce was a steady drip of confusion, nagging and ever-present in the backdrop, but it never threatened the story's brio or brilliance. And when they did coalesce, it was not some kind of big-bang singularity and neither was it predictable, just a tacit affirmation of the certain.

The characters of this book are not characters, they are windows, windows to look through, sometimes opaque- a bastion of seclusion or transparent- a weird vulnerability but mostly just translucent- giving you the space to interpret but at the same time, telling you that your interpretation doesn't really matter.

This book has effortlessly broken all my existing norms for determining a favorite book; I even doubt that I'd call it my favorite book, but the fact remains the same, it's powerful. It's not beautiful (It's ugly, I must say.) and it's not memorable (quite the contrary) but simply powerful and consuming.

Among the ubiquity of quotations that stand highlighted in my copy, this one could easily be my favorite:

"We learned that everything in the world divides in two: good and evil, male and female, truth and falsehood, child and adult, pleasure and pain. We learned that the counselor possessed a map, a map that would make everything make sense. A key. Like in a theater program where you have the actors' names on one side and the list of characters on the other—some neat division that divides the illusive from the real. We learned that there is a distinction—that there is always a distinction—between the performance and the performer, the reality and the lie. We learned that there is no middle ground."

"But the counselor lied," Julia says. "You lied. You lied about the pain of it, the unsimple mess of it, immeasurably more thorny and wretched and raw than you could ever remember, with the gauze veil of every year that passes settling over your eyes, thicker and thicker until even your own childhood dissolves into the mist."

Do you see what I mean when I say that it's powerful ? It's an impulse but not quite an effect and I loved the difference that I got to understand.

It isn't an easy book and I'm not sure I'll recommend it. I'll just leave it to the quotes to lure you in, should you choose to !

Jill says

An astonishing debut book, all the more so because the author is barely out of her teens. This novel, centering on a David Lynch-like saxophone teacher, her student, and a sensitive slightly older drama student, reveals the masks we wear, the performances we inadvertently (and sometimes deliberately) give, and the ways we finesse how others perceive us. The insights are amazing; at its core, it's about identity and longing.

David Hebblethwaite says

Where to start with *The Rehearsal*, a book that fizzles over with invention and exuberance; that rummages through haystacks of artifice and returns with surprisingly many needles of truth; that demands attention from its readers, but pays it all back, many times over — that comes laden with praise, every word of it justified?

We could start with the plot, though that might be something of a red herring. There's a scandal involving a girl at Abbey Grange school and one of the teachers there. The students at the local drama college decide to use the incident as the basis for a production; but it all gets too close to home for one of the actors when he discovers that he's embarked on a relationship with the sister of the girl at the heart of the scandal.

That's all accurate enough, but it tells you precious little of what *The Rehearsal* is actually about; and practically nothing of what the experience of reading it is actually like. From the very first page, we understand that not all is as it seems. We meet a saxophone teacher who says this to the mother of a prospective student:

'Mrs Henderson. At present your daughter is simply too young. Let me put it this way: a film of soured breast milk clutches at your daughter like a shroud...Do you hear me, with your mouth like a thin scarlet thread and your deflated bosom and your stale mustard blouse?'

She's not the only character to speak in such a mannered way, and nobody bats an eyelid over it. With hindsight, the clues are there all the way through, but it took me a hundred pages to see what was happening (and I think I only really *understood* it in the final chapter): we're witnessing a theatrical performance. But it's not the *same* performance as the one the drama students are doing; and it's no ordinary piece of theatre, because we're privy to characters' thoughts as well as their dialogue, just as in any standard prose fiction.

This is part of the unique atmosphere of *The Rehearsal*: Catton keeps it wonderfully ambiguous whether the scene we're reading is what actually happened, or a later theatrical reconstruction, or something else. The narrative itself is non-linear (I didn't bother trying to keep track of the true chronological order of events, but never felt disadvantaged for that); we often *hear* about key events rather than witnessing them directly; and sometimes we even get conflicting reports of what happened. In short, the novel is a maze of fractured realities.

If all this makes *The Rehearsal* sound like a cold, unreadable exercise of a book, let me assure you it is not — the pages fly by. Nevertheless, Catton has a very good reason for taking such an unorthodox approach to her novel. But, before I delve into it, I should step back and paint in some details on the generalities I've been describing.

The chapters of the novel alternate between two narrative strands, which merge in the last. The first strand concerns some of the girls at Abbey Grange, and three in particular, who all have private lessons with the same saxophone teacher: there's Isolde, whose sister Victoria is the subject of the scandal; Julia, with whom Isolde eventually becomes friends (and perhaps more); and Bridget, who seems destined to be the eternal 'other girl'. The second strand is set at the Drama Institute, and focuses especially on nervous young Stanley, who first meets Isolde when she stumbles accidentally upon a rehearsal at the college; and their relationship blossoms haltingly from there.

Catton has a sharp eye for characterisation. It's presented unusually, to be sure: given the nature of the dialogue, the characterisation is often 'external', and even exaggerated (as the author reminds us, 'theatre is a *concentrate* of life as normal'). But there are many insightful observations of human behaviour to be found here. The saxophone teacher (who often functions as a kind of twisted Greek chorus, saying things that I doubt most people would even want to think) sums Bridget up as 'always wanting to be somebody else.' Stanley wants to be an actor because he wants 'to be seen...if somebody's watching, you know you're worth something.' The most potent weapon that the girls of Abbey Grange have to use against each other is to define each other: who'll marry first? who'll cheat? 'It is the darkest and deadliest of their arts, that each girl might construct or destroy the image of any of the rest.'

And these examples all hint at Catton's main theme: performing, pretending, *rehearsing*. She is concerned with the myriad ways we put on performances in life, such as pretending to be what we're not; telling others what we think they want to hear; putting the interpretation we want on different events; and so on. That's the reason for all the elaborate games with form and structure: the text itself mirrors the theme — some characters are *literally* performing roles.

To elaborate on some of the other ways in which the theme manifests itself: we never do learn the truth of what happened between Victoria and her teacher. We don't know if it truly was assault, or something more innocent; whether he was the predator or she the instigator. It could be either, and because it's unknown, people can make whatever they want of it. And they do: the girls at Abbey Grange feel *betrayed* by Victoria, because she broke away from the group — at least, that's what we're told they feel.

Youth is 'the rehearsal for everything that comes after,' says the saxophone teacher. Well, adolescence as presented in this novel is a confusing time of not knowing quite who you are or who you want to be... Yep, that seems a pretty accurate view of it to me. Arguably, of course, adulthood can also be like this; and certainly there are adults, as well as adolescents, in the novel who are putting on a show. The teachers in *The Rehearsal* don't receive names (actually, some of the drama teachers do, but they're mostly referred to by titles), and remain largely anonymous; but two in particular — the saxophone teacher and the Drama Institute's Head of Movement — seem keen to live vicariously through their students and/or memories. Both find different ways of trying to do that; neither seems, to me, to do all that well out of it.

Performance and artifice are, the novel seems to suggest, everywhere. It would be neat and tidy to view one narrative strand as the heightened, theatrical representation, and the other as 'real' reality; but *The Rehearsal* doesn't permit such a simplistic reading. The drama teachers seem as outlandish in their own way as the saxophone teacher; and Stanley's father (who suggested that his son could get rich by taking out a life insurance policy on the child at school most likely to die) feels no more 'real' to me than all the interchangeable mothers who are content to let the saxophone teacher insult them and their daughters.

Even the very last scene — which may be when we can trust most completely that what it says on the page is what actually happens in the 'real world' of the novel — ends with one character saying to another, 'I'd be happy if you told me just enough of the facts so I could imagine it. So I could recreate it for myself. So I could imagine that I was really there.' After reading *The Rehearsal*, one might well come to the conclusion that this is an impossible dream.

Have I *nothing* bad to say about this book? Not really — the features that would usually be considered flaws become strengths in context. So it's undiluted praise for *The Rehearsal* from me — and I don't give that out lightly. Eleanor Catton was 22 when she wrote her debut novel, and the craft and artistry it shows are superlative. I think she will be one of the best and most significant writers of her generation.

Maddie (Heart Full Of Books) says

If my university tutor told me this had an f/f romance in it, I would have read it a lot sooner!

switterbug (Betsey) says

Reading this debut novel was like sitting in a black box theatre watching a play, suspended in time, and often like watching a rehearsal of the play that I am watching. As the characters move into focus, the lighting techniques add a perspective to the dialog. Just like a play's story is told through dialog; lighting; and movement (called blocking in theater lingo), Catton's novel coheres and communicates through the visible frame of a theatre lens; the boundaries of the theatre are the boundaries of the narrative technique that she employed to tell this story. Any action that is not possible within the constraints of a stage is not part of the immediate action of the novel. In lesser hands, this could have gotten weary for the reader. However, it felt like Catton effortlessly exhaled this novel. The theme of escaping yourself--of desperately wanting to be someone else--is a context of narrative construction as well as foundation for the story.

The story takes place between three neighboring groups of students. The Drama Institute is a drama college for aspiring actors, and the girls' high school, Abbey Grange, is an elite private school. The music school rounds out the settings of this novel. The sax teacher, a female of unknown identity, is often seen in shadow or startling light. Speaking of identity, only first or last names are identified, all except for one replacement teacher, Jean Critchley, who came on board when music teacher Mr. Saladin was let go. He had a scandalous affair with Victoria, one of the girls from Abbey Grange. This affair is the centerpiece story, from which all other stories, themes, and actions unfold. The abbreviated names personify the characters and their motivations in shadow for much of the story.

This is a cloistered world where arch teenagers say cruel things to each other and communicate through a pecking order. The most genetically sparkling are the most popular, and deviance is not tolerated (although desired). Reality is less authentic than truth, insist the acting teachers. Truth is uncovered and dislodged via a staged experience. The Theater of Cruelty is an exercise taught to first year drama students that both perverts and illuminates the human boundaries and boundlessness of ambition and fear.

The sax teacher speaks with a frank and flinty tongue to intrusive stage mothers and manipulates her students into shocking reenactments of her own past desires. Julia, (earmarked as the deviant) and Isolde, (the beloved and in vogue), two of her students from the high school, feel caged by their status. Additionally, the students envy Isolde's sister, Victoria, because she was desired by an adult. She is now a celebrated victim. The sax teacher taps into their confusion and pulls their emotional strings, inwardly avid as they puppet her predilections.

The acting teachers, known mainly as The Head of Acting and The Head of Movement, seek out favorite students who are reinventions of their past selves. Stanley is an earnest first-year student looking for his niche and willing to do audacious things to shed his virginal skin and experience the adult and sophisticated world. As reality is eclipsed by truth, the core of human behaviors--shame, fear, love, hate, and ambition--are played out with glee and gloom on a stage of human experience.

As a former and very amateur stage actress, I was fortunate to take acting classes with strong teachers that taught me techniques from various schools of thought. It allowed me to identify that this novel did a

masterful job of conveying the philosophies and approaches to acting that are taught by places such as the Berghof Studio, the Stella Adler Academy, and the Method school of acting. Catton, raised in New Zealand, was twenty-two when she wrote this impeccably researched book. She explored and exploited the stage experience with a witty and subversive precision. Moreover, she told a story about human nature, about pretending and escaping your limitations, about navigating through the quagmire of human desires--to find truth though lies.

Mark Zieg says

This was one of the most fascinating books I've read in a very long time. It is certainly not for everyone – the subject matter will put off some, while the innovative narrative structure may frustrate others expecting a traditionally linear story arc.

However, if you are sometimes more intrigued by the way a tale is told than the events described; if you oft find yourself lingering over a sentence of remarkable clarity and precision, wondering at the delicate interplay of consonance and connotation; if you are sufficiently self-aware of the classical boundaries between writer and reader, actor and audience, and take delight in the subtle ways in which such “fourth walls” may be breached, built upon, or incorporated into the interactive weaving between text and performance; then I cannot sufficiently endorse this exquisitely crafted experiment in wordplay, percipience and multidimensional storytelling.

For the record, I am not normally drawn to books featuring teenage girls, sexual awakening, or the halting and fumbling GLBT experimentation which serve as the plot drivers in this post-modern John Hughes saga of teen-teacher angst. Prosaic plot precedents aside, this thin, intricately woven volume has as much in common with Harlequin romance as Brittany Spears with *Die Walküre*.

Without wishing to spoil any of the many playful surprises which make *The Rehearsal* such a pleasure to unfold, one may liken the experience to an exercise with Plato's Cave: as pages turn, one is gradually led to wonder which elements are representative of the watchers, the shadows, the wall on which the shadows are cast, the fire, the Things themselves, or those watching the watchers. You could consider *The Rehearsal* a recursive ladder proof using *mise en abyme* and existential exit conditions – you could, if you were a literary geek with a taste for the avant-garde, but then I don't know who else would still be reading this far ?

Scathingly witty social satire, nonlinear self-referential exposition, and hot lesbian sex – do you really need more? Five stars from this jaundiced reader.

Antonomasia says

[4.5] A formidably clever book with a rubbish cover. Both the jacket and the synopsis - a scandal over the relationship between a sixth former (in British parlance) and a 31 year old teacher - look like something from the younger end of a publisher's commercial women's fiction dept. But as the polarised ratings show, those looking for a straightforward beach read will be disappointed by an experimental, theory-driven novel which speaks the unspeakable. (As with Joanna Kavenna, another intelligent writer whose first novel was cursed by

a chicklit cover, I wouldn't have discovered Catton if it hadn't been for a prize listing.)

This is not an easy book to write about; I've seen hardly any blog posts or reader reviews which capture it well, and I doubt this one will either. The professional reviews are relatively useful but *The Rehearsal* could do with an academic introduction.

The aftermath of the school sex scandal - an event which is significant because of what others think about it and the ripples it produces, (the two central participants having few direct appearances) - is interpolated with the first year of a group of students at a nearby highly selective university-level drama academy. The students have an annual tradition of a devised play with a history of success and controversy; this year they make their topic the teacher-pupil affair.

The Rehearsal is a book which deals with social roles, especially those adopted by or foisted on to teenagers, and with the construction of stories in judgemental gossiping reality, in people's heads and in different fictional forms.

In saying, for instance, what it might be like if the girl playing Bridget were instead playing Isolde there is a sense of characters with independent lives, yet also constructed by the writer and the onlooker, that reminded me of a more intellectually sophisticated version of Jasper Fforde's book-world. It also made theatre performance and novel seem much more similar audience experiences than they generally are, and I felt a little bit of the world sliding to make a different shape.

Some synopses of the book say that it's intentionally unclear whether the school scenes are "real" (an idea which makes one realise the daftness of asking "what really happened?" about a fictional work). However, this appears to me to break down when accounts of the drama academy's play show some roles as having been played by boys when they've been described in this detached what-if way using examples of girls. And the drama students' ideas and dialogue are less complex and intelligent than those expressed by characters in the school scenes.

The Rehearsal is not a book to underestimate though, so I may have missed a point of theory here. Acting theory is another significant component of the book (as well as literary theory which Catton refers to in this interview); a 20+ year old grade five Speech & Drama plus a few Wikipedia articles were not enough to appreciate its uses in this book fully. I'm very much in favour of fiction which uses specialised knowledge - as I mentioned in my review of *Hunters in the Snow* - though I only gravitate towards it when it deals with fields I know something about. Possibly related to acting, there were shifts in modes of presentation and communication which had a deliberate consistency although the author's background reasoning sometimes remained opaque to me.

From the point of view of reader enjoyment, the drama students were, compared with the school pupils and teachers, terribly bland. They are, of course, new actors, whose purpose is to be trained to express others words and not their own. So the blankness is deliberate (just as is the way their teachers are referred to by their departmental roles, not their names, and few of the students gain names until late in proceedings. The teachers, at least, have strong personalities.) But the most prominent drama student, Stanley (is he supposed to echo Flat Stanley?) is so damn nothingy that it's boring reading about him this often. I couldn't bring myself to care about this character in the slightest, which is very unusual for me.

My favourite thing of all, though, and the thing which instantly attracted me to the book in the first pages of its preview, is the way that the characters in the school scenes speak their thoughts aloud in intense and beautifully described terms. In some conversations between the saxophone teacher and various mothers, these could - judging by the other party's small-talk responses - have been pasted over what was "really"

said, as if the thought bubble and the speech bubble in a comic had been mixed up. (ETA The comics analogy was instinctive, but here Catton mentions Alan Moore as an influence.)

Mrs Henderson. At present your daughter is simply too young. Let me put it this way: a film of soured breast milk clutches at your daughter like a shroud....

'I require of all my students,' the saxophone teacher continues, 'that they are downy and pubescent, pimpled with sullen mistrust, and boiling away with private fury and ardour and uncertainty and gloom. I require that they wait in the corridor for ten minutes at least before each lesson, tenderly nursing their injustices, picking miserably at their own unworthiness as one might finger a scab or caress a scar. If I am to teach your daughter, you darling hopeless and inadequate mother, she must be moody and bewildered and awkward and dissatisfied and wrong. When she realises that her body is a secret, a dark and yawning secret of which she becomes more and more ashamed, come back to me. You must understand me on this point. I cannot teach children.'

Then there is the quite wonderful seventh-former Julia, who says much what I'd have thought in the same place, though - unlike her - I have usually considered it better not to bother articulating controversial opinions in certain company because I detest rows. She challenges a school counsellor's lecture which, trots out pat PC party lines and black-and-white binaries about power and boundaries.

But what if it's a same sex relationship? Surely comparison plays a much bigger role in same sex relationships... If comparison is abuse does that mean you reckon same sex couples are more abusive than ordinary couples?

I don't agree that Mr Saladin wanted to gain control...Sleeping with a minor [a seventeen year old, not even a minor here] isn't exciting because you get to boss them around. It's exciting because you're risking so much. And taking a risk is exciting because of the possibility that you might lose, not the possibility that you might win... It was exciting because he stood to lose so much if anyone found out.

...And anyway, isn't every relationship a power imbalance in some way?

Like me when I was at school, Julia also possesses that fear of being thought creepy by other girls at the same time as feeling annoyed by many and attracted to a few. The book, though, does have some of the sort of generalisations about female group behaviour which I only ever hear of in fiction by women writers. (My school was a bit odd and devoid of all manner of things good and bad which other people I've since known experienced at school. Our year never really gelled, said the teachers, which may be the reason for certain absent social features. Plus the most of the women I'm good friends with in more than a basic social networking sense tend, like me, not to be fans of hanging out in big all-female groups.) But despite all the occasional things that for me missed the mark, *The Rehearsal* captures very well the suffocating experience of being a teenage girl in a single sex school when you just don't see most things the way the others do.

In characters like the saxophone teacher and Julia, and in various features of Victoria's relationship with Mr Saladin (or even the psychologist father who tells tired old paedo jokes), I saw a challenge to a PC puritan orthodoxy and an understanding of people that made me like Catton and her book immensely. However, the unlikely lumping of the drama students into discrete groups of "boys" and "girls" with uniform thoughts about one another (they're drama students, no gay boys really?) was ostensibly disappointing in contrast to the nuanced treatment of the school pupils. Another interview indicates that Catton is no fan of binary oppositions either; she's seeking to mess them up as the book goes on but I don't think it comes across as clearly as it could in the drama academy sections of the novel. Then the students' use of language about the case seems to be drawn mostly from media sensationalism, and that seems to be nearly the final word on the

affair itself. Catton's conclusions about the matter and morality of the relationship are somewhat opaque, rightly so for something which is easily treated with too much absoluteness. And this is a better book for not overtly preaching, for simply setting out jigsaw pieces of opinion and experience.

This is one which, more than most books I've read, would benefit from re-reading.

A couple of other long interviews with the author about *The Rehearsal*:

<http://bookmunch.wordpress.com/2009/0...>

Liesa says

Ich habe lange mit mir gerungen, ob ich „Die Anatomie des Erwachens“ lesen möchte oder nicht. Nachdem ich von „Die Gestirne“ so unglaublich begeistert war und noch heute oft daran denken muss, war ich hin und hergerissen, ob ich mich nun auch an den Debütroman der talentierten Eleanor Catton wagen sollte. Dagegen sprach für mich vor allem eins, nämlich dass „Die Anatomie des Erwachens“ so ganz anders klang, als ihr preisgekrönter zweiter Roman. Ich wollte trotzdem nichts unversucht lassen und gab mich meiner Neugier hin, doch leider hat sich meine Befürchtung mehr oder weniger als wahr erwiesen.

„Die Anatomie des Erwachens“ verwebt zwei parallele Handlungsstränge miteinander, aber das ist auch, neben Eleanor Cattons großartigen Schreibstil, die einzige Gemeinsamkeit zu „Die Gestirne“. Einer dieser Handlungsstränge begleitet eine handvoll junger Mädchen, die alle Unterricht bei derselben Saxofonlehrerin nehmen und auf dieselbe Schule gehen, wo sich auch der Skandal – eine Schülerin hatte eine Affäre mit ihrem Musiklehrer – begeben hat. Der andere Handlungsstrang begleitet Stanley, der sein erstes Jahr an einer angesehenen Schauspielschule antritt, deren Erstsemester zum Ende des Semesters ein eigenes Theaterstück aufführen soll. Zuerst scheinen diese Handlungen sich überhaupt nicht zu berühren, sondern existieren einfach nur nebeneinander, aber im Laufe des Romans gibt es immer mehr Schnittstellen, bis die Stränge zum Schluss nahezu ineinanderfließen. Anders als bei ihrem zweiten Roman, gibt es in „Die Anatomie des Erwachens“ meiner Meinung nach aber ein viel zu offenes Ende, für mich hat das Buch auf seinem Höhepunkt aufgehört und mich als Leser ein wenig fallen lassen.

Besonders enttäuscht war ich außerdem davon, wie blass die Charaktere blieben. Immer wieder tauchten wir in ihre Fantasien und Gedanken ein und ich hatte bis zum Schluss dennoch das Gefühl, aus keiner so wirklich schlau geworden zu sein. Zwischenzeitlich fühlte es sich an, als wäre alles, das ganze Buch an sich, nur ein Theaterstück – die Charaktere inszenierten sich immer wieder, setzten Masken auf, schlüpfen in andere Rollen und die Erwachsenen – das heißt die Saxofonlehrerin und die Dozenten an der Schauspielschule – waren die Strippenzieher, die die Jugendlichen in eine bestimmte Richtung manipulieren wollten. Für mich war es deswegen auch schwer, auseinanderzuhalten, was und wieviel davon jetzt tatsächlich geschehen ist und was die Figuren sich nur in ihrer Fantasie ausgemalt haben. Wirklich sympathisch war mir jedenfalls keine von ihnen, das Ganze war viel zu unnahbar und undurchsichtig – ich wurde einfach nicht schlau aus vielen Szenen.

Das alles klingt nun sehr negativ, aber es gab auch einiges, was ich an dem Buch mochte. An erster Stelle muss in dieser Hinsicht auf jeden Fall der Schreibstil genannt werden. Es ist einfach Wahnsinn, über was für ein sprachliches Talent Eleanor Catton schon in ihren jungen Jahren verfügt. Jeder Satz ist ein Kunstwerk für sich und ich habe das Lesen – trotz der doch recht wirren Handlungsstränge – sehr genossen. Gerade die

Dialoge/Monologe waren mir aber auch schon fast zu philosophisch teilweise, vor allem wenn man bedenkt, dass es sich überwiegend um ganz gewöhnliche Teenager handelte. Wenn man diese Gedanken aber ein wenig beiseite schiebt, erwartet einen ein wirklich einmaliges Leseerlebnis, das sprachlich wahrhaftig überwältigend ist.

Mit „Die Anatomie des Erwachens“ ist Catton ein komplexes und unheimlich treffend und schön geschriebenes Buch gelungen. Für mich bleibt es aber von der Handlung her leider trotzdem meilenweit hinter dem zurück, was sie in „Die Gestirne“ geschaffen hat. Trotz allem würde ich dieses Leseerlebnis nicht missen wollen, vor allem nicht die klugen und interessanten Gedanken, die in Bezug auf die Schüler-Lehrer-Affäre gefällt wurden. Endgültig überzeugen konnte mich der Roman aber leider nicht, sodass es von mir nur 2.75 Sterne gibt, ich aber erwartungsvoll auf einen neuen Roman dieses Sprachtalents warte.

Will says

The Play within the Play

The Rehearsal begins with the aftermath of a sex scandal at a girls' school where a seventh-former, Victoria, has an affair with the music teacher. It's all about the adolescent reactions, their confusion and hostility (directed towards Victoria rather than the teacher), the awkward counselling sessions, the mothers' hand-wringing, and it's done brilliantly. Later, students in a drama school nearby decide to make a play out of the incident, but it becomes severely compromised when the lives of one of the actors (Stanley) and Victoria's younger sister become entangled.

Then there is the mysterious, unnamed, saxophone teacher who seems to take an unnatural interest in her students' private lives. She occupies a central role, and her music room forms its own theatre where the girls - and their mothers - reveal their real thoughts and anxieties about the incident.

On first reading I was bowled over by Catton's talent for dialogue and acidic commentary, though her teenage characters did seem to possess a level of wisdom and maturity far beyond their years. And their pithy observations (both the girls' and the sax teacher's) were sometimes just *too* clever, like the ones that you or I might wish we'd made, long after the opportunity has flown.

But then, how much of that interaction actually happened? You need to read carefully to realize that many of the scenes are in fact scripted, and it's only apparent towards the end of the book that much of the play must take place in the sax teachers "confessional". (At least I thought so; Catton takes care never to make it obvious what's direct, what's reported and what's imagined). So that brilliant dialogue is just how it might have been written by a drama class imagining the teenage girls' conversations. And if that's true, how do we even know they got it right? (view spoiler)

So I was thinking five stars for sure. But all the while, I was trying to figure out the drama students and their tutors – the (nameless, again) Head of Acting, Head of Improvisation, and so on – who were they and what was their role? Catton is obviously very familiar with the drama school environment but the entire account of the first-year students' activities added little to the story. Unlike the girls – brilliant creations; at once defiant, sardonic, fearful, critical and defensive – these students, even Stanley, remained faceless and undeveloped; and all those details she included about events in the drama school ultimately turned out to be padding – nothing depended on them at all. (She did the same thing in *The Luminaries*, only in twice as many pages - a lot of narrative but leading nowhere.)

I wasn't imagining this; I read *The Rehearsal* again to get a better handle on the slippery truths that Catton was so cleverly hiding, and while half the book was as fresh and absorbing as it was the first time, I found I was skimming the drama school chapters, and I didn't miss a thing.

Maxwell says

Phenomenal! Not only is this an amazing book, but it's Catton's debut, written during her year of getting her MFA...at the age of 22! Incredible.

The style is so unique, very much like reading the descriptions in a play at times. It deals with truth and fiction, masks and faces, putting on a facade, and it all centers around the arts: saxophones and theatre. I really loved the dramatic aspects of it.

It's a dual-narrative story, and the interweaving stories are crafted SO well. It's seamless. You could tell what was coming but it wasn't boring, it just built the anticipation more.

At times the dialogue is so unrealistic and contrived, sort of how characters talk in plays, very self-aware and philosophical. But I think that's exactly what Catton was pointing out, the fact that people are always trying to create a self-image that reflects how they want to be seen.

So happy with this one. If you're looking for something refreshingly written, unique, thought-provoking, and evocative, go for it.

Jess says

I could not finish this book. It was written in such a horribly douchebagey, pretentious, snobby way that it was literally painful to read. I don't know how anyone can actually like this. I mean, I am a fan of all things new and different, but this book is literally unreadable and does not make any sense. Seriously.

Nigeyb says

I read this book for my book group. Or rather I tried. I came to it having just finished "Sword of Honour" by Evelyn Waugh. The extreme contrast did not help the experience. One book, a masterpiece borne out of a global conflict, the other an unfathomable enigma borne out of a scandal in a girl's school. One felt profound and insightful, the other experimental and confusing.

My initial impression was that the book was intriguing. Here's the saxophone teacher addressing a mother: *"I require of all my students, that they are downy and pubescent, pimpled with sullen mistrust, and boiling away with private fury and ardour and uncertainty and gloom ... If I am to teach your daughter, you darling hopeless and inadequate mother, she must be moody and bewildered and awkward and dissatisfied and wrong."*

Intrigue soon gave way to frustration. I lack the patience and the inclination to ponder the improbable, non-

linear plot. I also lack the patience to work out what is real, what is imagined, and what it might all mean. The insurmountable hurdle was that I just could not care less about any of the characters. About halfway through I resorted to reading the plot summary on Wikipedia. Never a good sign. At that point, I started to skip ahead. I was invariably struck by the simple and accessible quality of the writing, but also how this was married to a tedious "plot" and dull characters.

Plenty of people love this book. Some of the scenes are intriguing, and the book is very well written, ultimately though its lack of credibility and coherence was distracting and annoying. I suspect the extent to which a reader might enjoy this book would largely depend on his or her tolerance for ambiguity.

Britta Böhler says

I can understand why people think this is an amazing book, but not quite my cup of tea, unfortunately.

Michael says

The Rehearsal by young New Zealand author Eleanor Catton is an astonishing debut novel that is both surprising as it is enlightening. The story is smart, playful and self-possessed with a wonderful array of character's that combined with such a arresting and seductive storyline that make it that whenever you open the book you will find it nigh on impossible to put it down.

What could of been precious at best, pretentious at worst, instead thanks to superb storytelling is shocking, funny and poignant as the author follows the tribulations of young people during there lives through and after school. Isolde is about to have her life made extra hard for her thanks to her older sisters alleged illicit relationship with teacher Mr Saladin. This incident remains as mysterious to us as it does to her seething classmates, furious at being excluded from this new realm of adult privacy. Catton instead will concentrate on the unremarkable and tragic Bridgit and Loner Julia who is too bright for the slutty girls and too savage for the bright girls", the butt of "frightened vicious rumours that she is possibly probably gay".

The girls describe school's gossip, rumours and counselling sessions for the benefit of the sax teacher who acts to bring Isolde and Julia together. The two girls will soon find ways to protect there true feelings, ways that are both selfish and they are poetic. On the other side we have Stanley who having very little to show for himself in his life tries to do something about it by enrolling in drama school. The institute prides itself on breaking and remaking students and Stanley will need all his strength to survive the extreme teaching. Stanley is a fighter but just when things are going well his life will encounter an all mighty fork in the road after meeting a young girl who he first noticed at one of his rehearsals. Little does he know who the girl Isolde's sister is and when he does his vastly improving world will come crashing down.

There is so much to enjoy and admire about this peach of a book. Combining a razor-sharp sense of her characters' self-love; a wonderful sense of language, both everyday and heightened: a wonderful apprehension of music and theatre and a great sense of comedy such as teacher Miss Clark's attempt at showing the flexibility of condoms by stretching one over her shoe while hopping red faced and puffing. I find it remarkable that Catton was only 22 when she wrote this story that has the glitter and mystery of a true literary original. This is the way coming of age novels should be and is must read for anyone who enjoys intelligence in there reading.

Jeff says

One of the most confounding books I've read in a long time. It's really well written, and filled with pages of stunning dialogue, but quite a bit of it seems to be at odds with the setting. Put another way: I find it hard to believe any of the characters in this book would say a lot of the things they say. They speak like characters, not people, and it's distracting...although apparently not distracting enough for me to put it down.
