



Bodies of Light

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Bodies of Light is a deeply poignant tale of a psychologically tumultuous nineteenth century upbringing set in the atmospheric world of Pre-Raphaelitism and the early suffrage movement. Ally (older sister of May in *Night Waking*), is intelligent, studious and engaged in an eternal - and losing - battle to gain her mother's approval and affection. Her mother, Elizabeth, is a religious zealot, keener on feeding the poor and saving prostitutes than on embracing the challenges of motherhood. Even when Ally wins a scholarship and is accepted as one of the first female students to read medicine in London, it still doesn't seem good enough. The first in a two-book sequence, *Bodies of Light* will propel Sarah Moss into the upper echelons of British novelists. It is a triumphant piece of historical fiction and a profoundly moving master class in characterisation.

Bodies of Light Details

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Author : Sarah Moss

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From Reader Review Bodies of Light for online ebook

Jennifer says

After having a good but mostly forgettable experience with "Night Waking," I wasn't prepared to be blown away by this book. Moss's touch is deft and light as a feather, and she effortlessly balances Victorian and contemporary writing styles. I rarely think a book is too short, but this one flew by and left me wanting more. While I read, I found myself thinking over and over again, "This is such an achievement." If you have even the slightest interest in the 19th century or fraught family dynamics, read this book.

Susan says

This is the third novel by Sarah Moss, following her debut, "Cold Earth," and "Night Waking." It is linked, loosely, to "Night Waking," in that May Moberley features as a character in the historical aspect of that novel and is the sister of the main character in "Bodies of Light." However, this is not a sequel, or indeed really a prequel, and it is not necessary to have read the wonderful "Night Waking," before reading this – apart from the fact that you will have missed a wonderful read. However, the joy of discovering an author is that you can go back and re-discover their past work and this moving and poignant novel is certainly a great introduction to this author.

Most of the book is set in Victorian Manchester and begins with the marriage of Elizabeth Sanderson to Alfred Moberley. Elizabeth's mother is heavily involved in religious works and charity and has brought up her two daughters, Elizabeth and Mary, to be serious social campaigners. Alfred, who is an artist and a designer of rooms and fabrics, seems to be ill-suited to Elizabeth from the start. His tastes are ornate, Elizabeth's simple and frugal. He takes tea with wealthy women who wish to have a beautiful dining room and she spends her time at the Manchester Welfare Society in social campaigning. The fact that Elizabeth's father has purchased their marital home is merely passed over in a brief comment; but you later feel it may have a great deal to do with why this young designer, not yet established, had proposed to his young bride.

The couple's first daughter is Alethea (Ally), followed by May. From the start, Elizabeth feels trapped by her baby, unable to live up to her own mother's harsh demands and this sets her on a difficult path with her children. She is a determined and uncompromising woman, who looks on Ally's childish nightmares with an almost vicious disregard. Every emotion is unworthy, when people are coping with so much worse, and Ally is full of guilt and a desperate desire to please her mother. Meanwhile, despite his dislike at the bullying and controlling behaviour of his wife, Alfred retreats into his work and his friendship with his friend, Aubrey. Elizabeth is a fascinating character. Despite her truly disagreeable behaviour, the author's allowing us to peep behind the facade at the beginning of the book, allows us to give her a degree of sympathy. She truly is a campaigner too, particularly for women, and her attitudes allow her daughters to pursue academic careers in a society where women are branded as unnatural for wanting to join men as equals in professions such as medicine.

We follow Ally throughout her childhood and into her attempt to become one of the very first women to practice medicine. However, although this story tells the story of Ally, it also says so much more and touches on so many different issues – both historical and familial. This novel is not an easy read and it confronts many issues which are, at times, difficult to read. There is an understanding between Ally and May that their life at home is not typical and in one moving scene Ally sees her aunt lift her hand to her son and expects her

to strike him, only to see him receive a playful cuff. Little glimpses, such as that example, remind us of how damaged this young woman is. Yet, we realise how strong, how intelligent and how capable she is as well – even if she does not have faith in herself. This is really the perfect novel for reading groups, as there is so much to discuss. I believe there will be a further book by Sarah Moss, with links to “Night Waking,” and “Bodies of Light,” and I look forward eagerly to reading it. Her novels are moving, perceptive, intelligent and thought provoking and this is another great addition to her work.

Grrlscientist says

Bodies of Light by Sarah Moss is a historical novel set in 19th century Manchester. As we follow the growing-up years of the main character, Alethea “Ally” Moberly, until she earns her medical degree, we learn about the social and legal plights of women during the early suffrage movement in Britain. We also become acutely aware of the truly terrifying male attitudes towards women, particularly those held by the all-male medical establishment who were spectacularly ignorant of the female body.

The novel begins when artist Alfred Moberly weds Elizabeth. Throughout the book, Alfred works as an increasingly successful designer of elegant rooms and ornate fabrics for wealthy matrons. In stark contrast, his wife Elizabeth, austere and frugal, is a religious zealot and social activist devoted to feeding the destitute, to saving prostitutes, and to achieving equality for women. Motherhood was the last thing on her mind.

This strongly character-driven story focuses on the first-born Moberly daughter, Alethea and, to a lesser degree, her younger sister, May. Alethea?—?meaning “truth”?—?is intense, driven and very intelligent?—?so much so that she wins a scholarship that enables her to become one of the first female students to read medicine in London. Yet despite her academic and intellectual strengths, Ally is emotionally fragile, exhibiting a life-long pattern of self-harm and experiencing frequent, debilitating anxiety attacks?—?thanks to her mother’s physical cruelties and endless harsh criticisms. In contrast, younger sister May is more resilient, appearing to survive Elizabeth’s severe child-rearing practices unscathed.

Ally’s true passion was learning, so it was Elizabeth, not Ally, who decides that she should become a medical doctor. Elizabeth came to her decision because she resolved that women, especially poor women and prostitutes, should receive medical treatment from female doctors, who would respect their modesty and safeguard their vulnerability. Ally’s devotion to medical studies was motivated by her desire for her mother’s love and approval?—?neither of which ever arrived, regardless of how successful she became.

Elizabeth Moberly is certainly easy to despise, but the author complicates matters by peeling back her heartless veneer early on to provide us with a glimpse of her own inner turmoil. It turns out that Elizabeth was also an unloved daughter who was physically tortured by her own religiously fanatic mother. In this passage, we gain insight into Elizabeth’s desperation; how trapped she felt by her newborn baby, and how, even as an adult, she was still tormented by her own mother’s impossible, now internalised, demands:

She woke up thinking of knives, took only porridge for her breakfast because even a butter-knife seemed a bad idea. She is still thinking of knives. The baby is still crying. For shame,

Elizabeth, says Mamma, think of the club women, who care for four or eight children in a dwelling smaller than this drawing room, who only have a fire for cooking and that only there is money for coal, who work all day as well as rising at night with their infants. You disappoint me, Mamma says. That I should see a daughter of mine a sloven and a coward! Mamma is right, has always been right. She is weak. She is slovenly. The baby has defeated her. If she goes out, she is afraid she will buy laudanum, and if she stays in the house, there are knives. And fire, and the staircase. And windows high under the gable. The baby cries. She cannot pick it up because of the knives and laudanum. So she stands there, in the doorway, and the baby cries. The baby drives her to evil thoughts. Its perpetual screaming calls her towards damnation. Before the baby came, she was full of light. [p. 44]

This thoughtful novel paints a rich portrait of sharp contrasts?—?poverty versus wealth, austerity versus elegance, colour versus darkness, confinement versus display, marriage versus prostitution. Ally's parents are a fascinating juxtaposition between unfettered imagination and rigid conformity, of enthusiastic independence and resigned submission. And then there's Ally, lacking self-esteem, guilt-ridden and desperate to please her mother, who contrasts with her sister May, who somehow managed to remain unscathed by Elizabeth's cruelties.

In addition to being a quietly intense reminder of how much women have achieved since Victorian times, ***Bodies of Light*** is a psychological, sociological and historical study of the history of medicine, of feminism, and of poverty in Victorian England.

A sequel is forthcoming.

Bodies of Light by Sarah Moss [320 pages, Granta Books, 2014] is shortlisted for the 2015 Wellcome Trust Book Prize. The prize winner will be announced on 29 April 2015.

NOTE: Originally published at *The Guardian* on 21 April 2015.

Always Pink says

No easy read. Another book I had hoped to love but somehow didn't. I have to say that I am an avid fan of Sarah Moss. I love her Iceland memoir *Names for the Sea*, I follow her blog and her literary reviews in the *Guardian*. I even wrote my one and only fan letter to her and she replied very friendly and graciously. I have learnt to expect that her style is always perfect, that her sentences cut like a knife, and her rhythm is impeccable. Nonetheless I am at a loss concerning her latest novel. Her 19th-c.- protagonist Ally is a likeable enough women who survives a pretty strange childhood to study medicine to become one of the first female doctors plus a happily married woman in the end. Some of the other characters have potential too. But all is squashed to death by a sadistic mother-figure who stifles each and every creative impulse and dominates the mind of Ally until her husband-to-be Tom kind of saves her. Ugghh. Am I to believe that some (suffragette!) women really were as secretly deranged as Ally's mother? What if Tom had not crossed Ally's path? The book has very happy, innocent and poetic passages, when Ally and her sister Mary are playing or enjoying themselves. But other parts have a sinister undertone, are dark and murky, intentionally jarring, stopping the pleasant flow of the reading. What is all this supposed to say about life, motherhood, womenhood, sanity? My mind somehow does not like to dwell on such ideas, but maybe it should? Perhaps I'll have to have to read

the novel a second time to be able to do it justice - and its intelligent author.

H.A. Leuschel says

This was one of the best books I've read this year. The author beautifully conveys the atmosphere of a young girl's upbringing during the 19th century, her quest in pleasing her stern and abusive mother while gradually making her way to independence. It was painful to read at times but I couldn't put the book down until I knew the ending which was very satisfying.

A very accomplished and extremely well researched book. Highly recommended!

Nathalie (keepreadingbooks) says

Bodies of Light is a historical novel taking place in the mid-1800s and which centres on women's fight to become doctors and in general be considered (more) equal to men in a time where a woman walking alone could be arrested on the suspicion of being a prostitute. In relation to this, it touches upon the 'weakness' of women and the notion of 'hysteria', while also dealing with such inherent human themes as motherhood, love, religion, and reason.

While the book turns out to be mainly about the two sisters May and Ally, we first become acquainted with their mother, Elizabeth, in the first few chapters. While it seems strange at first to be introduced to all of her thoughts and feelings at the beginning of her marriage to then leave her inner world entirely behind in favour of Ally's point of view, it quickly becomes clear that we need to know her reasons for behaving as she does and being the mother she is.

While it is a quick read, it's not a light read, not by far. I should warn anyone picking it up that it deals with mental health, a mild version of self-harm, and generally brutal subjects such as mental and physical abuse and rape/assaults. I found myself feeling anxious on a fair few occasions (besides wanting to say an angry word or ten to the mother..), but I was entirely gripped the whole way through. I did not want to put it down. Sarah Moss has, with one single book, become a new favourite author of mine. In fact, I just ordered two more of Sarah Moss' books as soon as I finished this one. Her writing is simple and accessible but has such depth and truth to it, and I found myself being more engrossed than I have in a long while.

A nice touch that I liked a lot was how (fictionalised) contemporary descriptions of paintings painted by the father, who is an artist, (and the father's artist friend) were used as chapter introductions, that would then reveal themselves to be key to the events of the chapter as you read on. That was an original spin on the genre and I always appreciate original spins.

There can be no surprise about my rating: 5 glorious stars.

Liisa says

Sarah Moss' stories are always an immense joy to read. The prose is breathtaking and brings to life such a fascinating cast of characters and their vivid environments. Following them through her novels also brings

light on some important, varying topics. In this case the message is strongly feminist and I adored the historical setting!

In the end when I put together how this is related to *Night Waking*, which I read last summer, I felt quite enlightened. And when I read the first sentence from the back of *Signs of Lost Children* and found out that it continues from where *Bodies of Light* ends, I got so happy I was literally jumping and started it right away. With every book I read from Sarah Moss, it becomes more apparent that she is one of my favorite writers.

Kaitlin says

This is a book I was reading as part of the #WellcomeBookPrize project I am doing with Elena, but I found I just couldn't get into the writing style of this at all and I really didn't enjoy what had happened in the first 15% or so (it was quite tedious and dull) so I decided to DNF this sadly.

Amanda says

I'm not sure why I didn't enjoy this more. Perhaps it was the right book at the wrong time. That being said I did still enjoy this. It was a fast read, especially for historical fiction. The time period was subtly and believably captured. I loved all the discussions on women's rights, prostitution, poverty, insane asylums and the beginning of formally trained women doctors in England. That was my favorite part of the novel. But I didn't find the characters or plot to be compelling or even very memorable. However I am looking forward to reading the sequel and learning more about the Victorian Era.

Darryl says

This superb novel is set in Victorian Manchester, and is centered on Alethea (Ally) Moberley, the first child of Alfred, a successful but eccentric painter and interior designer, and Elizabeth, a devoutly religious and strict Quaker who is completely invested in the well being of poor women within and outside of England, and to ensuring that Ally and her sister May stay on a very narrow and righteous path and devote their lives to the downtrodden.

In the 1860s and 1870s women were only just beginning to be accepted, begrudgingly, into colleges and professions that were previously denied to them. Girton College, the first for women at Cambridge, opened in 1869, which was followed by Newnham College in 1872, although Bedford College for Women at the University of London had preceded Girton College by 20 years. Formal medical education was denied to women, as Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, the first woman licensed to practice medicine in 1865 and the first to be accepted to the British Medical Association in 1873, remained the only female member of the BMA for nearly two decades, after the organization voted against allowing any other women to gain admittance. Those women who did attempt to gain entry to male only bastions, including medicine, were greeted with hostility and derision, or were simply ignored.

In 1864, the Contagious Diseases Act was passed by Parliament, which was initially created to limit the spread of sexually transmitted infections to soldiers. Policemen in ports and army towns searched for women who were known prostitutes, and any others who were suspected of soliciting sexual favors from clients.

Any woman who was walking alone could be taken into custody, even if she was married or had a legitimate reason to be out in public. Those accused of solicitation were arrested and taken to police stations, where they were strapped onto tables and forced to undergo painful and humiliating pelvic examinations with a metal speculum by male officers. Thousands of women were taken into police custody under the Contagious Disease Act; those who were found to be infected were transferred to Lock hospitals for treatment of venereal diseases, where they could be held for up to a year, and those who were uninfected were released. Some of the innocent women were so badly traumatized that they committed suicide shortly afterward, and undoubtedly many others were infected by the use of contaminated specula, thus contributing to the spread of the disease. For single men and soldiers, having sex with prostitutes was considered to be a necessary evil, and they were frequently released by police with little more than a warning. In later years, the Contagious Diseases Act was employed in larger cities and towns, to limit the spread of disease amongst the general public.

Elizabeth Moberley, like many independent women in the Victorian Era, was horrified by this Act, and because of this and the woeful health services available to women, she single mindedly determined that Ally would become a physician, and devote her life to women's health. The repressed but strong willed Ally agreed with her mother's decision, although she didn't have much choice in the matter, and the latter half of the book describes her pursuit of a medical career, and how she overcame numerous obstacles in the clinics and difficulties at home to achieve that goal.

Bodies of Light starts with the marriage of Alfred and Elizabeth, their difficult but successful marriage of opposites, Ally's birth and the profoundly negative affect her infancy and early childhood had on Elizabeth, Ally's largely unhappy childhood spent under the hard thumb of her inflexible mother, and her relationship with her far more carefree younger sister May. This was a wonderfully written and captivating story, with vividly portrayed central characters, and I was emotionally invested in Ally and cheered her on throughout the book. My only minor critiques are that I wished that it was a longer novel, with fuller descriptions of her medical education and the challenges she faced along the way, and it ended too abruptly for me, although it could be that I wasn't ready to leave Ally behind at the conclusion of the novel.

I look forward to reading Signs for Lost Children, which was published last year and picks up where Bodies of Light left off. I'm very surprised that this book wasn't chosen for last year's Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction, as it would have been a fabulous choice for the longlist, at least.

Katie says

There was a character in this novel who sucked all the drive and energy out of the narrative. We first see her as a virgin bride, about to marry a painter. Then as a new mother. She's depressed, can't cope with motherhood and fears all sharp objects because she doesn't trust herself not to harm her baby. She greatly interested me as a character, the prose was fabulous and I was sure I was going to love this novel. However it then jumps forward in time and the focus is now on the daughter. The mother has become a heartless cruel woman obsessed with charity, thrift and denying her two girls everything children in poor houses have to do without. She's become something of a one dimensional caricature. We get about 150 pages of her bullying her daughter and it felt like the novel was stuck in the same groove. The author was so intent on individual sentence writing – the prose is very pretty and the attention to detail was often brilliant – that it was like she had overlooked the necessity of plot and character development. When Ally, the daughter leaves home and trains to be one of the first female doctors the novel picks up massively and becomes riveting. There's a sequel to this book and because 100 pages of this book could be cut without any significant loss to the

novel's story or themes I couldn't help feeling it should have been one novel.

I also had a problem with the novel's psychology. In isolation the characters all work psychologically but in relation they don't. Why would an aesthete painter marry a woman who scorns all forms of aesthetic pleasure? Why even was there a painter in this novel? Two painters actually. One of whom might be guilty of paedophilia though this is flirted with but never developed. The marriage of Ally's parents seemed nothing but a device allowing the author to write about artists and their otherworldly tendency to use women as little more than muses, decoration for their visions. But isn't this a rather lame old hat feminist idea and hardly worth compromising a novel's psychology for? The men in this novel were generally weak as characters. The father seemed more like a ghost in the attic than a living presence. And the second problem of psychology I had was that Ally's mother becomes a carbon copy of her own mother and Ally wants nothing more than to please her mother. Show me a single family where this is true, where three generations in a row the daughter repeats the template of her mother. In my experience most daughters do everything in their power not to become like their mothers – it's almost a modus operandi. The other daughter in the novel was the more credible rebel spirit but didn't seem to interest the author much and was eventually got rid of. Anyway these are some of the reasons the middle part of this novel was gruelling for me to get through. Ironically though the ending was so good it made me want to read the sequel. I loved Moss' individual sentence writing when it was at the service of plot and character development. "Tom is there, holding a sandwich on a plate and standing in the bay with George, and Uncle James poised like a bird beside the silver ice-bucket usually saved for dinner parties but now beaded with condensation at half-past four in the afternoon, and the boys washed and brushed since school."

Rebecca says

Terrific historical fiction reminiscent of A.S. Byatt and *The Essex Serpent*. I'd previously only read contemporary-set novels by Moss, but her recurrent themes of vocation, childrearing and medical crisis are just as convincing when placed in the 1850s–70s.

Alethea Moberley is among the first female doctors to qualify in London, driven by a desperate wish to please her demanding, do-gooding mother. The descriptions of anxiety disorder (what would in that time have generally been dismissed as female "hysteria") and postpartum depression ("The baby has defeated her. If she goes out, she is afraid she will buy laudanum, and if she stays in the house, there are knives. And fire, and the staircase. And windows high under the gable. The baby cries.") are particularly keen. I also liked how the chapters are prefaced by descriptions of relevant paintings by Alethea's artist father and his circle.

Bonus: there's a sequel, picking up just after (view spoiler). *Signs for Lost Children* was published just one year later, and both novels were shortlisted for the Wellcome Book Prize (for books on a medical theme).

Bookread2day says

Bodies of Light brings us a beautiful written historical novel set Victorian Manchester. The modern novel about a family with a 19th - century setting.

Elizabeth Sanderson has been brought up by her mother's strict up bringing to believe in god. It has come to the time in Elizabeth's life that she is set to marry. Her husband who is an artist who loves to

paint, Giving birth to Ally who cries so much drives Elizabeth to evil thoughts.

Ally grew up intelligent with a losing battle to gain her mother's approval and affection. As Ally grew older she left home to escape the terrors of her childhood and to begin a new life in London.

Jess says

I really struggled with this. The subject matter and era greatly interests me but I found it slow and the writing dripping with a sensuality that often seemed inappropriate. I wasn't enamoured with the characters either, most of which seemed one dimensional and too predictable.

Richard Moss says

After dabbling with the past in *Night Waking*, Sarah Moss went full-on historical with her third novel *Bodies of Light*.

There is a connection though, as it includes May Moberley - a character that was involved in the historical aspect of *Night Waking*.

The focus though is principally on older sister Ally and her life in mid-Victorian Manchester.

Although, the novel's spotlight actually falls initially on Ally's mother Elizabeth as she meets and marries fictional artist and designer Alfred Moberley, who has a whiff of William Morris about him.

It is not a happy marriage though. Elizabeth is damaged by a harsh upbringing. Rather than learn the lessons from that though, she passes on the sins of her mother to her daughters.

Elizabeth is pretty monstrous, apparently determined to squeeze all joy and warmth out of the lives of her family. Her idea of correction is to burn her daughter with a candle.

But she is also a philanthropist and champion of downtrodden women. It's a complexity that cleverly pulls the reader in different directions. You admire many of the values she applies to the wider world, but despise the way she treats her nearest and dearest.

Ally and May's father is semi-detached, focused on his art and affairs beyond the home. His daughters occasionally become his muse, but he seems unable to rescue Ally from the punishing judgements of her mother.

That does though push Ally to study to become one of the first women doctors - a transition that eventually allows her to leave some of her past problems behind.

Motherhood is a recurrent theme in Sarah Moss's novels. It's rarely straightforward and often difficult. Elizabeth does push her daughter into becoming a pioneer, but does damage as well.

The historical details are well-drawn, but this is not a heritage novel. It has something to say about art, parenting, gender and relationships today too, even through the lens of the past.

I had not read much fiction or non-fiction before about the first female doctors. It's a fascinating insight into how tough it must have been to break the mould, but depressingly some of the barriers they face will still feel familiar to women today.

This is another skilful, and engaging novel from an author I really admire. Sarah Moss continued Ally's story in her next novel, *Signs for Lost Children*, and I shall be seeking that out soon.
