



Upstairs at the Party

Linda Grant

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If you go back and look at your life there are certain scenes, acts, or maybe just incidents on which everything that follows seems to depend. If only you could narrate them, then you might be understood. I mean the part of yourself that you don't know how to explain.

In the early Seventies a glamorous and androgynous couple known collectively as Evie/Stevie appear out of nowhere on the isolated concrete campus of a new university. To a group of teenagers experimenting with radical ideas they seem blown back from the future, unsettling everything and uncovering covert desires. But the varnished patina of youth and flamboyant self-expression hides deep anxieties and hidden histories. For Adele, with the most to conceal, Evie/Stevie become a lifelong obsession, as she examines what happened on the night of her own twentieth birthday and her friends' complicity in their fate. A set of school exercise books might reveal everything, but they have been missing for nearly forty years.

From summers in Cornwall to London in the twenty-first century, long after they have disappeared, Evie/Stevie go on challenging everyone's ideas of what their lives should turn out to be.

Upstairs at the Party Details

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From Reader Review Upstairs at the Party for online ebook

Sophy H says

This book blew me away. At its beating heart is the premise that we all essentially create a persona when we're young, in order to get through life and survive the experience of growing up. The characters who are attending a rural university here in the 1960's/70's are no different; the hard gobby Scouser trying to escape from the grimness and mundanity of factory and shop work, the camp Freddie Mercury-esque dahling with pretentious clothes and a feisty bitch mentality escaping a father who doesn't want to know, the down to earth Geordie lad who gets pulled into dressing up and creating a "mysterious" edge to appear more interesting, the feminist, the Trotskyist. They're all striving to create a personality and forge a lifestyle that might set them apart from everyone else. But they're just like the rest of us, barely drifting through, fucking it up then trying to fix it; falling in and out of love, realising adulthood isn't always a barrel of laughs. I found this novel fascinating, intelligent, multi-layered and riveting. The characters really resounded with me and the "situation" of the upstairs at the party title is tragic and unexpected, yet almost unavoidable for the character concerned. The biggest talking point I felt evolved from this novel, was that the "laissez faire" attitude of universities in the 60's/70's didn't work; young people need emotional support no matter which decade we are in. University and the transition into adulthood can be so hard psychologically and without some sort of stability, the more fragile of the bunch really suffer. Hats off to Linda Grant for portraying this so well. Highly recommended.

Jonathan says

This is the first book I have read by Linda Grant, and I shall certainly be back for more. Very witty and intelligent writing, with a firm grasp of recent social history which helps make this an entertaining and thought provoking read.

Caroline Deacon says

What an incredible read. You know when someone says that they're gripped by a book? I felt at times as if my insides were physically gripped. I wanted to know what was going to happen to all these characters, even though all we were doing as readers was watching them grow up.
Set from early 1970s till now it follows a group of students meeting at university and how their lives unfolded after a tragedy on their midst. It is so beautifully told with such evocative detail I felt I was living along side them all.

David says

The author (one of my favourites) is Adele (the narrator) in a partly autobiographical novel about her time at a Yorkshire university in the early 1970's. A well written and fast moving story which has a tragedy at its heart. Adele gradually comes to terms with her involvement in later life, and uncovers the secrets that were hidden in the past.

The book feels like we were one of Adele's set and it's hard to make up our minds if we really had wanted to be there. In fact, I didn't. But that is not to say that I wasn't swept along with their youthful discoveries. It's just my youth was so different.

Lynda says

I found this novel achingly poignant as Grant is around my late middle age (what a ghastly expression) and many of her memories are also resonant with mine. I too remember the women, my mother included sitting talking furiously whilst we played in the park and the talk ending abruptly as we came up to ask for a drink or a cuddle. It appeared to be women's talk and often involved operations and bleeding and wasting away, but as Grant observes most likely sex was discussed and impotence and rape as in those days when my mother was young none of this essential element of life was aired in the media or women's magazines you had to check it out with your peers and ironically as Grant observes these cohorts of women supported and enabled one another in a manner that was arguably more robust and sustainable than that of the feminist sisters coming after them. The novel is also about stories and how we invent and reinvent sometimes unwittingly, sometimes with calculated awareness the story of ourselves. A sociologically fascinating novel. with a big heart. Recommended.

Natalie says

It should have been good, but I didn't give a shit about anyone in this book. For a while I thought it was because I teach undergraduates and I know - much to my dismay - that they're not like this, and I'm sure that in the 70's they weren't like today's aspiring neo-liberal monsters, but even with their politics these characters felt vacant.

Dull.

Lena Nisula says

It took a while to get into, more due to my own life at the moment than anything else. It's well written and realistic. This is another one of those stories that take you back to a time and place you never experienced but somehow rings true and familiar. A tale of youth and university life, the ideals we all held dear and the invincibility of the time before we had to grow up and become adults... Or not. A tale of broken humans and broken hearts as well as the realisation that we're all part of something bigger and whole.

Rachael Eyre says

Ever since I was blown away by The Secret History aged 18, I've loved the "Weird things afoot on campus" genre. It's a great setting for a story because of the motley people a uni attracts, as well as the intense friendships and rivalries that can occur. I thought this one deserved a look because rather than the Oxbridge settings of most British stories, this one sounded far closer to my own alma mater.

The early chapters are promising - working class Jewish lass effectively swindles her way onto the course - and when we first arrive on campus, she's quickly adopted by Bobby, a gay Indian dandy. I liked him, and I liked the assorted types that populated the landscape. This was the uni experience as I remembered it, with nary a chinless wonder in sight.

Then Evie drifted into the story, and everything crumbled.

I shall say it now: I didn't care for Evie, and grew steadily less interested in her as time went by. If we were given any reason for the collective infatuation, it'd be forgivable, but as far as I could make out, everyone fancied her / was drawn to her because ... she was pretty and wore eccentric clothes? Adele develops a sort of crush on her, which might have redeemed it, but in yet another instance of what I'm starting to call the Twelfth Night Trope, she ended up in bed with her equally pallid brother George instead!

To make matters worse, Adele grew progressively more unlikeable, especially in her treatment of the "townie" Denise. Stevie ditches Evie for someone less demanding, which he has every right to do, but Adele holds it against Denise for the rest of her life, refusing to acknowledge she's a nicer (and certainly saner) person than Evie. I expect uni educated readers are supposed to look down on her for her class resentment, but frankly I cheered her on.

Don't come away thinking I hated this book. I didn't. The writing was good, the characterisation was spot on in many places, and the portrayal of uni life was brilliant. I simply wish Linda Grant had a more interesting story to tell, with more likeable protagonists.

Grace says

Linda Grant is a wonderful author, her books take me back to the 70s and evoke memories and feelings long forgotten. Upstairs at the party, doesn't disappoint. I read it over two days, each page filled me with the hopes and dreams of being a teenager in the 70s. Now it is finished, like a true master, each one of the characters stays with me like a long lost friend recently rediscovered

Martine Bailey says

I didn't much enjoy *The Clothes On Their Backs*, but I absolutely loved this. Adele is a Scouser (a Liverpudlian) in the 1970s, a bit slippery, an outsider from a distinct Jewish milieu of brash women who survive their troubles by sheer determination and mutual support. Hating her job on the perfume counter at Lewis's department store, she manages to talk her way into a thinly disguised York University. I listened to the audio version, which was from this point on, a delight of droll accents, from Wolverhampton to effete 'Bobby', to whom Adele acts as 'fag hag'. The university's experiment of throwing a melange of young people together from a variety of classes and regions is superbly depicted. I loved the whole whacky range of naïve radicals, who identify with different schisms of feminism, communism and gay politics, all trying to out-radical each other. It certainly rang true to my memories of the time and was, with hindsight, hilarious. There is also a strange truth to Adele's fascination with Evie, half of a Bowie-esque couple; somehow Grant conveys her characters' ability to be both smart and incredibly naïve. But of course the true fascination lies in what happens to the bunch of posturing radicals once the real world is confronted after graduation. Following the characters up to the age of fifty-eight, we get a powerful sense of what happens to youthful

ideals and how those ideals can limit opportunities. In the end, this is a sharp but essentially jaded view of a generation which ironically didn't appreciate their own great good fortune.

Blair says

Review originally published at Learn This Phrase, as part of a post about this and another of my favourite books of the year, Sarah Perry's *After Me Comes the Flood*.

I was interested in *Upstairs at the Party* from the moment I read the outline. *In the early Seventies a glamorous and androgynous couple known collectively as Evie/Stevie appear out of nowhere on the isolated concrete campus of a new university... For Adele, with the most to conceal, Evie/Stevie become a lifelong obsession, as she examines what happened on the night of her own twentieth birthday and her friends' complicity in their fate. A set of school exercise books might reveal everything, but they have been missing for nearly forty years...* This is an accurate description of the book, but only partially accurate, and for all that I found this blurb extremely intriguing, I could easily have been disappointed. (I imagined, for example, that it would explore gender politics in some detail, when in fact it only touches lightly on this subject.) Instead, after starting with the impression that this would be another tale of twisted relationships with an academic backdrop - a sub-genre I adore but also, generally, quite an easy set-up for a good writer to execute successfully - I found it becoming something else entirely, something much bigger and more impressive than I had originally expected.

Upstairs at the Party is, in fact, Adele Ginsberg's life story. It is a university book in one sense, but it goes far beyond that, confronting adulthood in a way few 'coming-of-age' novels do. Themes of identity, concealment, performance and artifice run throughout the story from Adele's childhood to her middle age: the androgynous image cultivated by Evie and Stevie is just one of perhaps a hundred examples. While, as the blurb hints, there is a mystery surrounding Evie, there is more lasting significance to the way Evie's constructed identity transcends her as an individual, and continues to impact on those who knew her for decades after its creation. The university the characters attend (never named in the narrative, but obviously York) is a strange mix of old and new, a combination that fits with their shared experience of coming of age in a stagnant era, after the hedonism of the Sixties but before the rise of punk. This disorientation seems to define the characters' generation, not only while they are students but for the rest of their lives, and perhaps this is why they are so keen to pretend, to experiment with their political affiliations, sexualities, and personas. We see them long after they have abandoned the idealism of youth; we discover the many things they go on to be - which doesn't always make for happy reading.

Like Siri Hustvedt, Grant is adept at portraying complicated, damaged female characters - women who may not necessarily be likeable but are raw, real, angry, honest - and demonstrating that emotional anguish and doubt are constants in life, not just a part of youth. Adele is a difficult character, and an unusual protagonist for a story of this type: while she is something of an outsider, so are almost all her friends, and she is certainly tougher than many of them, doggedly optimistic, with a hard, deliberately uncomprehending attitude towards depression. She also expresses some opinions about rape which I found genuinely shocking. Adele's faults, though, don't make her an unpleasant character. Rather, they make her truly authentic, as if a sympathetic biographer knew they had to include every detail of her personality in order to be accurate. In fact, one of the best things about this book is the painfully believable characterisation. As students, the characters may be pretentious and hedonistic, but they are very much aware that they are playing out roles, not behaving naturally; the author makes it clear that just beneath the surface is a great deal of self-

consciousness, immaturity and uncertainty, and this carries through to their older incarnations, particularly with Adele.

In *Upstairs at the Party*, everything happens: a whole lifetime happens. It's an intelligent and broad-ranging story which touches on issues including feminism, religion, seventies left-wing politics, racism, gender, AIDS, adultery, motherhood, growing up, growing old, and trying to find out who you are, even if that 'finding out' is still going on when you've left your youth behind. Effortlessly evocative of every era and setting her narrative touches, and supernaturally adept at weaving the effects of history (personal and otherwise) into her characters' lives, Grant has written an absolute powerhouse of a book.

Original notes, with spoilers, here: (view spoiler)

Mandy says

This perceptive and compelling novel follows the life of Adele Ginsberg, growing up in Liverpool in the 1960s, at university in the 1970s and on into adulthood. Bleak and often gloomy, this nostalgic examination of an era is both convincing and thought-provoking. It examines all the issues of the day, right up to the present, and as a piece of social history is perhaps even more successful than as a novel. Not that I didn't enjoy it as a novel – I did – but it loses its way at times, and the characterisation is not always successful, sometimes descending to stereotypes. However, in spite of any reservations I might have, I actually think this is one of Linda Grant's most successful books, presenting us as it does with such a persuasive and well-observed trajectory of one woman's life, and although the earlier episodes are perhaps the better ones, nevertheless overall this is a book well worth reading, especially if, like me, the time period mirrors one's own.

Evelyn says

This is such a hard book to review without giving away spoilers so I won't go into much detail about the actual story. Set in the early 70s, our protagonist, Adele, sets off to a newly opened University on a full student grant and a cheeky lie, in the hopes of escaping a dismal and uneventful future in her sleepy, working class, northern town. At Uni, she settles in and makes friends, but soon becomes transfixed with the mysterious Evie who is like no-one she has ever met before.

Upstairs At The Party is a wonderfully written, wholly intelligent, coming-of-age story as Adele tells us her life story, focusing on the events that happened on her 20th birthday which will lead her to thinking about a certain mystery for decades to come. I'm quite obsessed with the 60s and 70s, so this book really intrigued me and I found myself yearning to have been born at the same time that Adele was so that I could have potentially experienced a completely different life at University. Set against a backdrop which saw huge changes in society and public attitudes, the rise of feminism, and all the politics that went along with it, would have been utterly fascinating. And of course, getting a Uni education for free would have been the icing on the cake!

Bookthesp1 says

Linda Grant sets out to follow the story of Adele, her plain speaking confident protagonist. Her childhood, and through a clever conceit her university career allows the novel to open up to friends at university and their stories as well. Hence, the mysterious couple known as Evie/Stevie and a number of roommates and confidantes are also portrayed as is the central mystery that is established concerning the enigmatic Evie- a mystery in which many of the characters are or seem to be complicit. This is all set initially (in the uni scenes at least) in the 1960s and 1970s, a period that Grant confidently portrays with wonderful evocative and referenced writing and a real sense of time and place. Grant manages to fast forward through the post university careers of the carefully developed central grouping of characters whilst constantly referring to and returning to the mystery that is Evie- a mystery that Adele cannot let go. This all sounds somewhat cliched and in less assured hands could easily be lumpen and plodding. However, Grant seems to be at the top of her game enjoying both the telling of the story and the opportunities to create and describe the layered story of setting characters and events. Adele is both deliberately an eye for the reader as well as a character who almost refuses to play the game that Grant wants her to play. In some ways this novel also ticks the genre boxes to cover a possibly wide readership. Grants books isn't a campus novel but the extended riffs on university and campus life are both realistic and elegiac. Similarly, it isn't a state of the nation novel but there are enough references to then and now to provide a sort of prototype female "Our Friends in the North" type narrative. Grant manages the seventies retro scenes well as she does the time shifts and scene changes with minimum fuss. There is a poetic quality to her writing that works wonderfully well and her eye for detail and the telling line is spot on. Overall, this is a wonderful book that manages to hold the reader with the huge confidence of its writing and the distinctive literary voice that Grant manages so well. This is one party you have to be at.

Always Pink says

Lind Grant made her very vivid memories of her student days into a novel, well kind of. – Is it a novel? Yes

it is, the book has a plot, and a story line, and asks some important moral questions. But I stubbornly read it as a personal memoir anyway, as it touched so many nerves with me. As the author states in her foreword: "The novel is inspired by a particular time in my own life, but the characters and the events are the product of my imagination."

Grant herself studied at York in the seventies and her book captures the atmosphere of the vast concrete buildings of the university compound far outside town quite brilliantly. Her descriptions of the campus and of the oh so odd mixture of students in her student flat reminded me very much of my experiences as an exchange student at Leeds University in 1987. Her critique of the totally unguided kind of life students were allowed to lead then and the horrid consequences that could have had, was clear-eyed and valid. What became of the protagonists after they finished their exams or dropped out and real life caught up with them is well-observed and very touchingly depicted.

Grant's characters stand out clearly, they are absolutely convincingly drawn, I never felt for a moment that they were mere imaginations (see above...). I found their naivety tremendously touching and the whole book felt to me like a very tender hearted endeavour. Grant is asking "what made us into the people we are today?" and shows how some never had a chance to live their potential and how others sadly never even wanted to. I underlined many sentences, as I love Grant's witty and afraid-of- nothing kind of style, and found chapter 31 to be especially perfectly written. In it the narrator inherits a house bequeathed to her by a flamboyant friend who died of AIDS (" Is anyone still alive who remembers him apart from me?") and is thinking about her (then) lonely life as a single and her mother's comments to it ("Put your war paint on, dear, than you can face the world").

The final chapters bring some of the student friends together on a short journey to their former alma mater to round things up narratively and to show them slowly but steadily advancing into old age now. Grant's supreme powers of observation make this excursion into a splendid tour de force (or maybe tour de farce?) too. I enjoyed the read/ride tremendously, and end with a quote from one of the final chapters of the book: "I have tried my best not to turn into my mother, though sometimes, when I am applying my lipstick in the magnifying mirror, and the shade I've chosen has not been muted by a softer artificial light, I see her reflection. I see her and all her friends, those chatterboxes in their powdered glory, the spores of face powder falling from their chins on to wattled necks. And I paint it on, more and thicker, to imitate the red badge of courage."
