

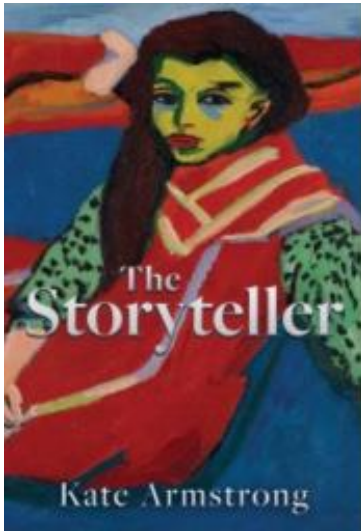
The Storyteller by Kate Armstrong

Holland House, 2016

A vivid glimpse into the inner workings of an unravelling mind

A young woman alone in the world attempts to claw back her sense of self. Prepare to be dragged into the eye of the storm as she allows an older woman of questionable motives to mould the essence of her life into a story.

'Here is what I suggest. That, bound together in this circle of hell, we talk fondly like sisters and we share our stories.'



The Storyteller opens in the aftermath of a failed suicide attempt. As two women meet in a psychiatric unit, the reader must rely on the observations of Iris, the disturbed older woman who, with a bejewelled, elegant hand, takes the vulnerable young Rachel into her grip. Does she mean well or is there something sinister in her plan to re-write the younger woman's life?

Part memoir, part fairy-tale, part horror story, part tragedy, this challenging novel defies categorisation. The story unfolds with the seasons as the outside world moves forward while the young woman is locked away, initially in a literal sense within the confines of the ward, but always within her own mind as she faces an insular battle for growth and healing. It is both bleak and triumphant as Rachel emerges from the depths of despair, timidly re-entering the world and going through the motions of rebuilding her life.

The present tense, second person narrative creates a claustrophobic sense of immediacy. It almost feels as if the reader is being spoken to directly, gaining a stark insight into the mind of a deeply unhinged collaborator who manipulates events to suit her own twisted purpose. The result is a vividly unsettling reading experience.

'Your nod is tentative. But the doors are locked and you have nowhere else to go.'

A palpable air of mystery grows as the younger woman has no choice but to be implicit in Iris's game. She appears to want to help Rachel, but is it the insightful observations of a born writer or paranoia and jealousy that lead her to make deep and sometimes cutting remarks? Occasionally cruel yet strangely compelling, she twists the story to suit her own romantic fantasies.

Rachel's predicament highlights her intense vulnerability. Depression threatens to steal her identity as fear is replaced with a feeling of nothingness. The intimate portrayal of her tentative awakening exposes the fragile nature of recovery as anxiety and dark memories emerge. This beautiful novel is not an easy read. It is a monologue written by an unreliable source interspersed with snapshots of a possibly fuller truth. The reader is forced to interpret the unspoken messages behind the story as the nature and reliability of the memoir genre is deliberately called into question in the process of editing a life.

With its sheer innovation and originality, The Storyteller is a stunning, unique book which perfectly encapsulates the zeitgeist of the contemporary small press scene.

About the author

Kate Armstrong is from the North of England and studied English Literature at Oxford University. *The Storyteller* is her triumphant first novel and she is currently working on her second.

About the publisher

Holland House is a bold, dynamic publisher of high quality literary and genre fiction. Investing time and energy into producing books by unique voices, they are not afraid of advancing new and challenging work, as well as great books written in the classic style. 'We want to produce quality writing and to work with good people' (Robert Peett). Imprints include Caerus Press for historical fiction and Grey Cells Press for crime fiction.

About the reviewer

Becky Danks is an avid reader, creative writer, dog lover, poet, and reviewer of books. Follow her on Twitter: @BeckyD123