



The Dark Circle

Linda Grant

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The Second World War is over, a new decade is beginning but for an East End teenage brother and sister living on the edge of the law, life has been suspended. Sent away to a tuberculosis sanatorium in Kent to learn the way of the patient, they find themselves in the company of army and air force officers, a car salesman, a young university graduate, a mysterious German woman, a member of the aristocracy and an American merchant seaman. They discover that a cure is tantalisingly just out of reach and only by inciting wholesale rebellion can freedom be snatched.

The Dark Circle Details

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From Reader Review *The Dark Circle* for online ebook

Laura Spira says

I have enjoyed Linda Grant's earlier books but found this one disappointing. Post-war London and the cultural changes of the 1950s are effectively sketched but the main characters seem shallow and rather stereotypical. The story centres on the experiences of a motley group of patients at a TB sanatorium. They have little in common but forge apparently enduring relationships in this isolated environment, although I found the last sections of the book unconvincing on this. I didn't find the characters sufficiently engaging to want to know about their later lives: was all the detail about Lenny's career with ITV really necessary? And repeated mention of his Hugo Boss suits - product placement?

My mother was treated for TB in a similar institution during the war, a slightly earlier time than this book is set. Much of the description of "Gwendo" tallies with my recollection of her experiences but her treatment (which carried on regularly until I was about two years old) was always referred to as AP, artificial pneumothorax: in the book it is just called pneumothorax, a small detail that bothered me.

I had the feeling while reading that Ms Grant was a bit out of her depth: her earlier books have offered very convincing depictions of milieux and characters she has known well but this seemed to be an environment that she had researched but not fully imagined, especially in the general atmosphere of the sanatorium, an environment much more powerfully evoked for example in "Your presence is requested at Suvanto" by Maile Chapman.

(I read a free copy supplied by Netgalley)

Robert says

Bailey's Women's Prize for fiction 8/16

At one point during *The Dark Circle*, one of the main protagonists, Valarie is describing Kafka to the other lead protagonist Lenny. Here Grant plonks a perfect analogy for all the characters in this novel are living in a Kafkaesque situation.

The Dark Circle is primarily about the post war sanatorium culture, where people suffering from TB were placed in buildings which resembled hotels and subjected to both utter boredom and healing techniques which would be seen as cruel and unusual by today's standards. During this time the NHS was established, which meant that people from all sorts of backgrounds were allowed to enter sanatoriums.

The two main characters of *The Dark Circle*, twins Lenny and Miriam are admitted and a lot of the novel focuses on their life and daily interactions with the other patients; the bookish Valarie, the boisterous American Arthur and the German Hannah. Eventually the main protagonists are cured but they cannot shake off the sanatorium's influence, which affects them, even in old age.

While the writing style is good, *The Dark Circle* has got flaws. The American character is stereotypical, and

acts like something out of a 70's sitcom, the LBGT aspect of the novel is good but could have been better and the last 50 pages or so feel rushed. It still is an enjoyable novel and some of Grant's paragraph sparkle with humor. I am a bit baffled why this one made the Bailey's shortlist though.

Simon says

I am not going to forget this book in a hurry. The Dark Circle takes us into a tuberculosis sanatorium in the Kent country side four years after the Second World War. We are invited through its doors with Lenny and Millie, twins both recently diagnosed, as we meet those already staying there along with their stories and the siblings before they arrived. I won't say more on the plot because I want everyone to read it but I absolutely loved it. I won't forget the world of the Gwendo or the characters who inhabited it for a long, long time.

Jonathan Pool says

A novel wrapped around the shocking treatment of Tuberculosis in the immediate post World War Two period, started off with great promise.

Unfortunately, the deeper I got into the book, the less I respected or enjoyed either the characterisation or writing style.

The wrap around premise: the medieval attitudes towards, and treatment of TB (aka. Consumption), is horrifyingly fascinating. Linda Grant references true events of unbelievable ignorance and cruelty.

I am glad to have read The Dark Circle, to have learned about the origins of twentieth century sanatoriums, of medically collapsed lungs, of broken ribs, of Streptomycin.

Grant takes her historical, 1950's reality inspiration further with reference to the production of pykrete in Smithfield, London; experimentation of a sort even weirder than the goings on at the "Gwendoline" centre. So far, five stars all the way.

But, The Dark Circle storyline descends into farce, and the disparate group of poorly inmates all bond and unite in a strange, totally unconvincing, finale. The last quarter of the book, parts two and three, are unnecessary, repetitive, unsatisfactory.

Few of the characters are well drawn.

Uncle Manny is a stereotypical spiv, useful to the writer only to force dramatic changes in the narrative.

Arthur Persky is a (poor)facsimile of Ken Kelsey's McMurphy in **One Flew Over The Cuckoos Nest**.

Peter Lezards Labour MP is nothing more than an unconvincing contrivance to spice up the plot twist.

So what a strange read.

I would be surprised if this won the 2017 Bailey's Women's Prize

Sarah says

Review originally published on my blog [here](#)

So, this is another book I read as part of my goal of reading all the books shortlisted for the Bailey's Prize. I was a bit hesitant at first about this as the blurb didn't look very interesting at all however I ended up being enchanted by this novel.

The main two characters are Lenny and Miriam who are twin siblings both diagnosed with tuberculosis and sent to a sanatorium to recover. While there, they have to deal with the variety of treatments and deal with the knowledge that a cure exists but is not yet available. The story follows them as they make friends and just cope with their time there.

The novel moves at a very slow pace, showing the monotony of their day-to-day lives and the issues they deal with. It also is excellent at portraying a view of England just after the second world war and some of the best parts of the novel were just focusing on the society and how it was changing. The characters were all excellent and I enjoyed reading about their growth as they got to know each other and deal with the fact that the once exclusive sanatorium is now open to the "lower classes" due to the NHS.

This book is a delightful journey focusing on sanatoriums in the period of their decline and how it affected the characters both while they were there and the lingering effects it had on the rest of their lives. The end of the book shows us the characters in the future and how their lives developed after leaving the sanatorium which I really enjoyed as I'd grown attached to many and was keen to find out what had happened to them.

I can definitely see why this book was shortlisted for the Bailey's Prize and it's definitely one of my favourites so far. I would definitely recommend it and it makes me glad I'm doing this personal challenge as it's the sort of book I never would have picked up myself.

Kirsty says

I have read and very much enjoyed a couple of Linda Grant's books to date. With all of the hype currently surrounding this novel, particularly as it has just been shortlisted for the Baileys Women's Prize, I was left distinctly unimpressed. Whilst I am all for historical novels set in and around the sanatorium, this fell rather flat for me.

The Dark Circle is interesting in terms of its historical setting, and whilst the story begins in rather a promising manner, there is no real consistency to the piece. I also felt that it was sorely lacking in terms of its characters. They were shallow and stereotypical; the only one whom I wanted to know more about when she was introduced was Valerie, and she soon succumbed to being just as predictable, naively privileged as she was, as Lenny and Miriam. The characters in *The Dark Circle* are not realistic enough to carry the whole, and the lack of plot hooks or twists makes the whole feel rather lacking.

The Dark Circle has an awful lot of promise, but I am afraid that I did not find it lived up to this. The final part of the novel felt altogether unnecessary; rather trite and irrelevant. I did not care enough about the protagonists to want to know what happened to them in their post-sanatorium lives. Sadly, *The Dark Circle* disappointed me, and I am now in two minds as to whether to read any more of Grant's novels in future.

Jennifer says

I absolutely loved the concept of this - following the patients in a 1950s British sanatorium for cases of tuberculosis. Grant so beautifully captures the way the world of that time was shifting beneath people's feet architecturally, technologically, and medically. Along the way, she uses a light, comic touch and a meandering plot to weave together ethical, historical, and personal questions. But I think *The Dark Circle* suffers from inconsistent tone, repetitiveness, and blandness. Maybe I would've loved it more if I hadn't read it for a prestigious lit prize, but I just didn't find it very impressive or noteworthy. Still, if the subject matter interests you, this is a great read.

Shawn Mooney says

Some lovely writing here but I was bored out of my tree. I knew it was time to bail at the 20% mark when one of the main characters said he wanted to escape the TB sanatorium due to sheer boredom and I finally came alive, cheering him on. I got out, but not that poor bugger.

Anni says

At an isolated TB sanatorium, a closed community of all ages and backgrounds is subjected to an authoritarian medical regime with its echoes of concentration camps and experimental procedures. The stirring of rebellion against patient conformity acts as an apt analogy for the postwar erosion of class distinction and deference to authority. Evocative period detail in slang and music helps to illuminate this entertaining piece of social history.

Reviewed for Whichbook.net

Amanda says

3.5 stars

Rebecca says

Linda Grant's seventh novel stars Lenny and Miriam Lynskey, nineteen-year-old twins and representatives of London's small Jewish population. It is 1949; Miriam works in a flower shop and Lenny has just been rejected by the army at his National Service medical appointment. He has tuberculosis and there are worries about Miriam's lungs, too, so it's off to the Gwendo (the Gwendolyn Downie Memorial Hospital for the Care of Chronic Cases of Tuberculosis, that is) for both of them. We briefly see them through the eyes of the cab driver who takes them down to Kent: "The pair in the back were common as muck."

It's clear this is no ordinary sanatorium; it has a "reputation for being a modern, iconoclastic facility for the very best people," like Lady Anne and Miriam's Oxford-educated roommate, Valerie. The Lynskeys, as NHS rather than private patients, may be looked down on as a different class of people, but they bring fresh life into the place. That's doubly true of new arrival Arthur Persky, a twenty-six-year-old Navy man from Brooklyn. He enlivens the bleak, clinical surroundings with rock 'n roll music and a certain sex act. The

Gwendo, once a place of boredom and conformity, now seems like a site of quiet rebellion.

One of Grant's key skills is characterization, and short chapters from different characters' perspectives give us access to their backstories. I especially liked getting to know German refugee Hannah Spiegel. Kafka, oddly enough, forms a link between her and the Lynskys: Valerie has been reading *The Metamorphosis* aloud to Miriam to try to educate her; Miriam, absolutely captivated, gets Lenny in on the listening sessions, and he asks Hannah to interpret the book for them since she's read the original German. "No, no-one can explain, it's not possible to do so," she replies. "You experience it in your way, it's a labyrinth you must pass through but the labyrinth is yourself."

The same might be said of tuberculosis. Each of these patients has the same disease, so Dr. Limb and his nurses sometimes treat them as interchangeable, yet each medical journey is individual and unpredictable. The typical approach was a pneumothorax injection to temporarily collapse one lung so it could 'rest', but in extreme cases some patients would have ribs removed. Great hopes were pinned on streptomycin treatment, and on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish day of reckoning in 1950, Dr. Limb takes on the role of God, weighing up who live and who will die in the coming year. He has seven courses of streptomycin to distribute, but who will get them? The weakest? The woman he's in love with? Or the ones with the most chance of improving? Meanwhile, Miriam's condition is worsening, and Lenny and Persky decide they'll do whatever it takes to make sure she gets one of those injections.

I was impressed by how Grant evokes her period setting through dialogue, slang and music. The novel's tone is wry yet melancholy, almost nostalgic. The terrific opening paragraph gives you a taste of the no-nonsense style:

London. Big black old place, falling down, hardly any colour apart from a woman's red hat going into the chemist with her string bag, and if you looked carefully, bottle green leather shoes on that girl, but mostly grey and beige and black and mud-coloured people with dirty hair and unwashed shirt collars, because everything is short, soap is short, joy is short, sex is short, and no one on the street was laughing so jokes must be short too. Four years after the war and still everything is up shit creek.

The final 60 pages are set in the future and reveal what happens to Lenny, Miriam and key others in the decades after they leave the sanatorium. These former patients are bound together in the title's "dark circle" of suffering, but because TB has been eradicated no one remembers their pain. "From a death sentence to a course of antibiotics in a decade," Lenny marvels. The novel loses momentum a bit in this short final section. I felt it would have been more powerful if Parts II and III were cut and the book simply ended with the plot coming full circle and Lenny and Miriam leaving the Gwendo in a taxi. But this is a minor quibble. *The Dark Circle* does what the best fiction does: drops you right into a situation you've never thought about and can't begin to imagine—until a first-class novelist does so for you.

It was a delight to participate in my first blog tour. My thanks to Poppy Stimpson of Little, Brown for the free review copy.

Originally published on my blog, Bookish Beck.

Hannah Greendale says

Click here to watch a video review of this book on my channel, *From Beginning to Bookend*.

It is 1949 and twin siblings Lenny and Miriam Lynskey are diagnosed with tuberculosis and shuttled to a sanitarium in Kent where they are subject to idle days and wondering if they'll fall victim to a disease that's traditionally fatal. In the cold confines of the upper-class sanitarium, they make the acquaintance of several people they might never have crossed paths with under any other circumstances, among which is a rowdy American boy who goes by the name Persky. Together they learn that a cure might be within their reach, if they're daring enough to take action.

Though generally void of emotional evocation, *The Dark Circle* has one tender element: the relationship between Lenny and Miriam, siblings determined to look out for one another no matter the cost. There is a bond forged at an early age after the death of their father, emboldened by their relocation during the war, and solidified for all eternity by their stay at Gwendolyn Downie Memorial Hospital for the Care of Chronic Cases of Tuberculosis (The Gwendo).

'Then when the war came [Lenny and I] got sent to Wales, I mean that was demonic. Honestly, I've never known anything like it in my life. Of course we ran away first thing, just a night under that roof and we were off, but when we tried to hitch a lift on a lorry back to London no one would take us. They all had black hearts, those Welsh, they brought us right back again to the farmer and the farmer's nasty wife.'

[Miriam] was very considerate. She would leave and stand outside the door when she knew he wanted a wank. He did the same for her when she took care of some mysterious things on her own, even though he felt faint standing upright and his legs would buckle underneath him.'

Given that the book begins in 1949, one might anticipate a story that touches on post World War II lingering prejudices, but aside from the occasional racial slur and the following quote, race issues take a backseat in this narrative.

'While there's nothing wrong with Miriam, it's a little too Hebrew for our clientele. Not that they are prejudiced, but they expect a level of service and certain standards from us.'

The characters, while diverse, are lackluster. Two Jewish teenagers, a German woman, a woman of the aristocracy, a university graduate, air force officers, a car salesman, a rambunctious American boy, and a beautiful nurse set the stage for conflict, but everybody more or less gets along. What comes across as a potentially explosive combination of characters to throw together in a confined space post World War II proves to be a collection of apathetic personalities and a subsequent story of low stakes and minimal drama.

It's possible the author chose to avoid conflict between characters as a means to demonstrate that the potentially fatal diagnosis of tuberculosis shifted each character's priorities, making any war-related drama trivial by comparison. However, no quote or character realization to that effect springs to mind.

The Dark Circle more readily examines shifting healthcare practices in Britain after the war ended, such as the materialization of the National Health Service and the emergence of a cure for tuberculosis.

The antibiotic streptomycin, developed in 1946, presented itself as a possible cure for tuberculosis but was still under testing and widely unavailable in 1949. With the cure out of reach, a tuberculosis diagnosis is supposed to be a tragic event, but mostly the characters take their illness in stride, accepting whatever treatment plan is prescribed and devoting the rest of their time to griping about their relentless boredom.

The sick officers implicitly accepted institutional life and understood the nature of orders and obeying them, and so adjusted easily to their environment.

[Hannah] was not a rebel herself. That had been proven beyond doubt. She preferred to keep a low profile and pretend obedience, which was how she had made it this far.

Such throbbing energy in the next bed a few inches away, such stamina and rage, Valerie thought wearily. Yet [Miriam] would fall into lassitude and boredom, we all have.

Embellished writing is rare and usually crops up when the irrevocable loss of time is emphasized.

But here the sanatorium stealthily removed the last traces of the officers' youth if they had arrived with any. It did it day after day, they were a table of old men still in their late twenties. Look at Flight Lieutenant Jenkins in his shawl over his uniform and his eyes circled with black shadows and his white lips. The Gwendo was their autumn season.

(view spoiler)

Finally, the book jacket purports this is a story of characters inciting rebellion, but that word is a laughable misnomer for what actually transpires.

With generally bland writing, an inability to garner an emotional reaction to the characters or events, and a story that flatlines on the page, *The Dark Circle* makes for a baffling addition to the 2017 shortlist for the Baileys Women's Prize.

Gumble's Yard says

she had been maimed by an illness that [in the 21st Century] was so far out of fashion it might have been a wartime recipe for pink blancmange made from cornflour when everyone these days ate real chocolate mousse and tiramisu. TB was spam fritters and two-bar electric fires tuberculosis had died with the end of people drinking nerve tonics and Horlicks.

Perhaps the most fascinating part of this book is the glimpse into what is effectively a forgotten world (but one less than 65 years ago) when TB was still close to an incurable disease and one only treated with an austere regime of complete rest in sanatoriums, alongside crude physical intervention.

It was nice being in a new decade with a pleasant number, the curly 5, the fat 0, no longer the sharp points of a 4, which would rearrange themselves into a swastika if they felt like it, and had done War was in the process of becoming a memory, not a situation to be endured and survived. Anything new had to be a good thing.

A clear theme behind the book is of British society on the cusp of change from the 1940s to the 1950s: the end of rationing; the rise of the National health service and its increasing take-over of private health facilities; the aspirations and achievements of the Labour government set against the increasing realisation

they could be voted out of power; the struggles of a free-to-use service being able to cope with increase demand and the costs of drugs which cure a previously fatal condition; social mobility struggling against entrenched class distinctions alongside a breakdown in traditional forms of deference, for example to medical professionals, and an increasing trend for people to demand the right to decide on their own treatment; the rise of new entertainment mediums (television and rock and roll). It's clear also that Grant sees at least some of these themes as reflecting issues in 21st Century Britain.

However I simply failed to engage with the characters in this book – which matters in this case because clearly the reader is meant to engage with and care about those characters (and even is meant to be interested in the last 60 pages, which first of all cover many of the characters meeting 3 years after they leave the Sanatorium) and then picks up their life stories from the present day. The crucial plot development seemed implausible to me, and the eventual career of Lenny, which I found of almost no interest, revealed in the acknowledgements to be based on the story of an actual television comedy writer.

Overall I felt I would have gained more enjoyment from a lengthy Sunday magazine feature on the pre-antibiotic treatment of TB than from this fictional account.

Mary says

What promised to be an interesting subject just didn't deliver.

I couldn't gel with any of the characters and after an excellent start the story somewhat rambled on.

Although set after WW2 not much was mentioned so you had no feeling for the time it was set.

So disappointed, back to a classic I think!

Eric Anderson says

I've had a copy of Linda Grant's most recent novel "The Dark Circle" on my shelf since it was published in November, but for whatever reason I didn't get to reading it despite being extremely moved by her previous novel "Upstairs at the Party." So I was delighted to find it on the Baileys Prize longlist as it gave me a great excuse to get it down and finally read it. Although this novel is very different from her previous one I was immediately drawn in by the eloquence of Grant's prose with its excellent witty dialogue and vibrant characters. The story concerns a brother and sister (Lenny and Miriam) in 1950s London who contract tuberculosis. The city and social environment are vividly rendered where the continued deprivation of the war and effects of the bombings are still intensely felt. A very different scene is evoked when the pair are taken to a sanatorium in Kent which was once an exclusive facility for the privileged but it's now taking in patients under the new national health care system. This creates an intermingling of people from all walks of life who are plagued by this illness and pining for a rumoured miracle cure. The result is a spectacular evocation of the passage of time and changing values through the lives of several fascinating characters.

Read my full review of *The Dark Circle* by Linda Grant on LonesomeReader
