



Things Bright and Beautiful

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A lyrical and suspenseful debut novel from an exciting and darkly comic new voice in literary fiction.

Mission House was not built for three people. Especially when one of them won't stop humming.

1954, the South Pacific islands. When Beatriz Hanlon agreed to accompany her missionary husband Max to a remote island, she knew there would be challenges. But it isn't just the heat and the damp and the dirt. There are more insects than she could ever have imagined, and the islanders are strangely hostile. And then there are the awful noises coming from the church at night.

Yet as the months go by, Bea slowly grows accustomed to life on the island. That is until an unexpected and interminably humming guest arrives, and the couple's claustrophobic existence is stretched to breaking point.

Events draw to a terrible climax, and Bea watches helplessly as her husband's guilt drives him into madness. It's not long before Bea finds herself fighting for her freedom and her life.

Things Bright and Beautiful Details

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Author : Anbara Salam

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From Reader Review Things Bright and Beautiful for online ebook

Rebecca says

(DNF @ 6%.) Not compelling for me in the least. Even the twist in the last line of the prologue was not enough to keep me reading. Try *Euphoria* by Lily King instead.

Liz Barnsley says

This was one of those novels where I adored the beautiful writing and was immersed into the setting but didn't quite manage to connect with the characters.

The premise was highly intriguing, the actual backdrop to the life of these missionaries was pitch perfect, I felt I was living there with them. The theme of religious beliefs and differing cultures was fascinating and I felt like Anbara Salam really got into the deep seated island community and she writes with an unsettling and dark prose that really appealed.

Overall it was a mesmerising read but my lack of character love just dropped it slightly on a very subjective and personal level. Overall this was a literary debut of high standard and I'll look forward to more from this author.

Resh (The Book Satchel) says

Edit : Lowering my rating after a few months of reading the book.

Max and Bea are a missionary couple sent to Advent Island in South Pacific.

Pros

- extremely atmospheric. The rainforest comes alive with all the teeming insects and other fauna; pineapples and fruits. A magical setting
- Themes of religion
- Claustrophobic: a new entrant into the house that Max and Bea share, suffocation of religion and its values ; feeling stuck in a marriage etc

Cons:

- I didn't feel any connection to any of the characters at any point of the novel and this affected my enjoyment of the book
- The book is quite slow.

Disclaimer : Much thanks to Penguin for a copy of the novel. All opinions are my own.

Kate Vane says

I was drawn in by the prologue of this book and the conflict at the heart of it, but if it weren't for that, I'm not sure I would have persevered. The writing is beautiful and has a hypnotic quality, giving a real flavour of the island. However that's also its weakness - it's harder to cut good prose when it isn't pulling its weight in narrative terms. There were also large sections of backstory that were probably useful to the writer but superfluous to the reader. It did eventually pick up pace towards the end and the drama turned in a way I didn't entirely expect.

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I received a copy of Things Bright and Beautiful from the publisher NetGalley.
Read more of my reviews at <https://katevane.com>

Elle♣ says

3.5 stars

Thank you to the author and NetGalley for giving me a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review

This is a strange book that I'm glad I found. It's a slow-burning, claustrophobic and unnerving story that follows the lives of Pastor Max and his wife Bea, on Advent Island - a place full of unrelenting tropical heat, an abundance of rats and insects, neverending 'tabus' (specifically for the women of the Island) and one large humming machine that intrudes on their life.

For Max, this intrusion sparks a slow, psychological downward spiral. Over the chapters, we see and feel how Max gradually disconnects and declines in his health and sense of reality, as he becomes more delirious and disturbed.

Salam does a great job of depicting his growing madness, and the oppressive and suffocating environment that Bea and Max endure on the Island. As well as making me cringe and itch in revulsion at all the mentioning of their critter infested surroundings.

The only negative thing I have to say about the book is that I only cared about Max and Bea's chapters - I didn't really see the relevance in most of the other POV's, and it felt like there were chapters full of unnecessary information because of this.

I'll definitely keep a look out for more of Salam's books in the future!

Anna says

A solid debut. Some imperfections here and there (a few cliches, an occasional mixed metaphor, weird inconsistencies of character etc) but ultimately it was

1. something I haven't read before
2. exactly what I wanted to read right now.

Michelle Curie says

When your husband has to move to the South Pacific due to his work, it might sound like you have hit the jackpot. *Things Bright and Beautiful* will make you reconsider your upcoming vacation plans. Set in the 1950s, Bea Hanlon accompanies her missionary husband to a remote island, where she will not only face the struggles of a life in dirt, damp and among insects, but also see her husband slowly but surely losing his mind.

It was the setting and time that attracted me to this book and both was conveyed very vividly. With most of the story told from Bea's point of view, her struggle to accustom to the new living circumstances feels relatable and Salam makes the world come alive with vivid and claustrophobic descriptions. The biting vermin, the tropical heat and the hostile islanders... it is all there.

What is not, on the other hand, is a plot that managed to grip me from beginning to end. There are inserted chapters of other people's lives which did not feel relevant to the main plot we were following and I feel like the story would have profited from focussing on a smaller cast, as you did not end up caring about the rest of the people anyway. There is a build up of suspense towards the end of the novel, with the second half being a lot more action-packed and I wish it would have been more of that.

Things Brights and Beautiful is an atmospheric novel that is a nice change in time and setting from many other things that are being published at the moment and I enjoyed my stay on the South Pacific Islands (mainly glad to not having been there in person), but I can't help but feel that this would have made a stronger novella than full-length novel.

SueLucie says

Bea accompanies her new husband Max on his mission to the New Hebrides of the mid-20th century. It's not a brand new mission, the previous incumbent of the post, Marietta, is still on the island and makes a surprise, unwelcome reappearance a few months after they arrive. But this version of Protestant Christianity has only a tenuous hold on the hearts of the islanders, who tend to overlay it with belief in devilry and exorcism rituals, not to mention clinging on to the old pre-Christian faith in leaf magic. An incident on the mountaintop involving Max and Marietta leaves Max mentally unbalanced and his mission starts to break down, leaving Bea vulnerable to sinister forces.

The claustrophobic atmosphere of the village and the surrounding jungle is the outstanding achievement of this novel. Torrential rain turning the landscape into a mudbath, the sweltering heat and humidity, festering sores, vermin and insects make it so difficult to carve out more than a temporary existence in such a place. As seen in Bea's attempts at gardening, the slightest loss of vigilance and the jungle creeps back in to reclaim its own.

The author has a splendid way with words and produces some cracking imagery. Just one example that particularly struck me:

'On the days when the plane merely circled over the strip like a large gull, and headed back west again, Max felt a crochet hook of disappointment picking at the lining of his stomach.'

There is an appealing deadpan humour here too. I loved the idea of the tasty vegetable garnish Bea adds to meals known only as 'hedge'.

Highly recommended and, since this is the author's debut novel, I can't wait to see what she tackles next. Thanks to Penguin/Fig Tree via NetGalley for the opportunity to read this one.

Jack (That English Guy who Reads) says

Like the novel's stunning and vivid cover, Salam brings the jungle setting to glorious life in her debut novel.

Her writing is saturated with vibrant detail, exploring both the beauty and the horror of this wonderfully diverse and atmospheric setting.

However, I found that the blurb did not quite match the novel itself; I expected Bea to be the central character but there were times she got lost beside Max's narrative or that of other sub-characters (whose purpose I'm entirely unsure of). Bea and Max were well-explored and developed, though I didn't always feel that their marriage came across as dysfunctional and I was therefore surprised by the turn of events.

This was very much literary fiction that was character-driven but in places it lost sight of this when the focus shifted away from Bea and Max. It was still enjoyably dark, creepy and full of mystery.

Emma says

A book that evokes all the claustrophobic discomfort of living on the outskirts of a jungle as missionaries. This book was full of atmosphere but a little overwhelmed with details unnecessary to the main story. I did not feel much connection to Max or Bea.

Thanks to Netgalley for an arc of this book. All opinions are my own.

Claire Fuller says

This is mostly the story of Bea who goes with her missionary husband Max to a Pacific island in the 1950s. Everything is a battle: making friends, dealing with heat and the rain, what to eat, what she is and isn't allowed to do, the irritation of an unwelcome visitor, but most of all her relationship with her husband, who grows more deranged by the page.

The writing and the descriptions made me feel as though I was really there, alongside Bea, picking the rat droppings out of the rice, searching the rain forest for something to eat. She is a really interesting character, surprising and loving, but also delightfully wilful and wild.

This isn't published until April 2018, but I highly recommend it.

Marnie Ava says

A story set in an unspecified time (but most likely the late half of the twentieth century), “All things Bright and Beautiful” tells the tale of missionary Maxis and his wife Bea. They have moved to an isolated island in order to spread “the word of god” and find the “light”. The story explains Island life and Maxis’ slow decline into madness after he kills Marietta, an old ex-missionary on the island. Initially a clear-minded and logical man, Maxis spirals into chaos after a terrible fever and starts to behave like the shaken son the island who attempt to use and trap the women using their “dark prayers” and exorcisms.

The story seems to have a good plot at its roots, allowing for a healthy balance between an intriguing storyline and references to the real life adventures of those who really were missionaries in the late twentieth century. However, as a reader I personally lost interest in the other plot after the fourth or fifth chapter, due to the slow moving storyline and the overload of factual information. The story hasn’t been edited in places where the plot becomes bland and boring. Essentially there isn’t enough of an extrapolated plot and this leads the story to become stagnant, only picking up towards the end of the novel.

Bea as a character is strong and independent, with many layers to her character that create an interesting personality that can be analysed and picked apart. Other characters in the plot seems unnecessary, adding very little to the plot, such as the Vietnamese slaves that work for a framer on another island. Whilst these characters do help to explain more about the world that has been created, they do not need as much expansion as they are given. The plot should be focused on where the characters are.

The story picks up a lot more towards the second half of the book, but there is a lot of filler that I do not think is needed in the story that has been written. I feel that this novel should either be cut down to a novella, focusing on the characters of Bea, Maxis, Santra and Aru; or it should be extrapolated more using the same characters mentioned so that there is more substance. I feel that this book simply isn’t ready yet, there is still much more that can be improved and I feel as though the author should develop her writing further in order to improve the flow and quality of her writing. This is why I’m giving it 2/5 stars.

Cathy says

Things Bright and Beautiful is set on an island in the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu), which I can safely say is a first for me as the location for a book. “The isle is full of noises” (The Tempest, Act 3 Scene 2).

Arriving on Advent Island with her missionary husband, Max, Bea finds her new home is no Bali Ha’i. Whatever she was expecting it wasn’t the incessant insects, dirt, heat, rain and the almost suffocating nature of the jungle. ‘Its constant whirring noises, its fetid organic complexity. Its restlessness. So many thousands of trees and and bushes and leaves, each populated by slithering, crawling insects, all with tiny hearts pumping and pumping.’ The jungle threatens to invade even their home in the Mission House. ‘On Advent Island, the jungle refused to stay outdoors, it lurked at the corners of the village and wormed its way into civilization. Pale weevils cavorted in the powdered milk, black orchids blossomed in the shower... It perpetuated itself with explosive fertility.’

Max is buoyed up by the strength of his faith and his fervent belief in the importance of his mission. ‘To

think there were still villages, here on the island, which had never heard the Word. It was the last frontier. His chance to carve out another kingdom for the Lord.’ However, Bea initially struggles to adjust to the many ‘tabus’ governing a woman’s place in the social order of the island. ‘She wasn’t supposed to go walking around by herself. She wasn’t to show any skin above her elbows or knees...She wasn’t allowed to go out in a dugout canoe. It was tabu for women to fish...She wasn’t to wear her hair loose. She mustn’t dry her cloths outside, especially any underclothes. She wasn’t to point directly at anything, because it was unlucky.’ I loved the way the author gives us small signs of Bea’s spirited and slightly rebellious nature, a spirit that will sustain her through the trials to come. ‘It made Bea feel a little wild. All she wished to do was to leap from her house on a Sunday morning, wearing only her underclothes with her hair shockingly loose, and run straight down the cost in a dugout and start fishing.’

The island is so remote – no running water, sanitation, electricity – that I constantly had to remind myself the book is set in the 1950s, not in the Victorian age. Bea and Max’s isolation from the life they’ve known before is almost total. ‘They had brought a transistor radio with them, but the island was too far out to catch any frequencies.’ Because there are no clocks on the island, the pace of life follows ‘island time’. However, the islanders are industrious and resourceful, making use of whatever animal life, fruit, herbs and roots the island can provide. They are used to making long treks between villages that take hours, even days, over often perilous paths where one slip can spell disaster – and, in fact, does with momentous consequences.

Although many of the islanders have ostensibly embraced Christianity, they cling to their traditional ways or ‘kastoms’, with anything else being ‘tabu’. They have a particularly strong sense of the power of the Devil, who exists for them as an almost physical presence within parts of the jungle or within people. Under the influence of the charismatic Aru, the villagers indulge in ‘dark praying’ in an effort to exorcise the evil presence they feel all about them.

Bea’s mood lifts as the rainy season ends and the vibrant, kaleidoscopic profusion of the island becomes evident, conveyed in wonderfully lush prose by the author. ‘Candy-pink hibiscus flowers appeared in the hedges, crinkled at the edges like cr?pe paper. Crimson-headed honeyeaters buzzed at the tips of banana suckers. Gigantic butterflies swarmed in and out of the palms, streaked with electric-blue zigzags. Occasionally, in the fringes of the coconut palms south of the village, there was the bright flash of parrots, a conflagration of colours so impossibly lurid they looked like novelty recreations of themselves, made from marzipan.’ Max is not doing so well. The rain, the insects, the humidity, the heat, the macabre night-time chanting of the islanders and the after-effects of malarial fever all play on his mind. ‘The island was doing things to him. He was supposed to be here to set an example.’ He is also consumed by guilt for his role in a tragic event that he has kept secret.

Having formed a valuable friendship, Bea gradually develops a courage and resilience that surprises Max. She’s no longer the damaged young woman he first met in Venezuela. However, affected by the febrile atmosphere of the island, Max begins to fear that Bea’s very soul is in spiritual danger. ‘And despite his best efforts, the darkness inside her persisted’. Events take a darker turn before reaching a shocking conclusion.

The book introduces other characters and another storyline that touches on the impact of colonialism and the plight of Vietnamese workers brought to the island on five year contracts to toil in the plantations. However, this always feels secondary to the compelling story of Max and Bea.

This is a book that transports the reader to another time and place. At times, *Things Bright and Beautiful* has a dreamlike quality; at other times, it’s more the stuff of nightmares. With its intoxicating atmosphere, *Things Bright and Beautiful* is like the love child of *Black Narcissus*, *Heart of Darkness* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. An impressive and imaginative debut; I look forward to reading more from this author.

I received an advance reader copy courtesy of NetGalley and publishers, Fig Tree, in return for an honest and unbiased review.

Thebooktrail says

Visit the locations in the novel

It took me a while after I'd read this novel to realise what I thought about it. It fascinated and annoyed me at different times during my time on Advent Island, a fictional place thank goodness, where the book is set.

It was totally immersive and claustrophobic throughout though. Pastor Max and his wife Bea come here but it gets too much too soon for the Pastor and he descends into a hell of his own. Those trees get darker and more dense, the island even more remote and cut off from reality. Delirium is his only companion before too long.

This growing madness and spiral into hell on earth was sometimes difficult to read and when mention of the humming started, I felt myself getting as annoyed and frustrated as the characters. I swear I could feel those bugs creeping over me as I read.

I'll stop there as you'll want to go on that journey to Advent Island yourself as it will have various effects on you so take the bug spray and read this underneath a giant net.

Be aware though if anyone hums near you as you read...

Dannii Elle says

Things Bright and Beautiful follows a preacher, Max, and his new wife, Beatriz, as they venture on a mission to the hostile Advent Island. The stark interior of their new home, the tiring and endless series of chores, the unaccessibility of any sort of Western convenience, and the continual scuttling and creeping of untold scaled and winged creatures makes Beatriz's life a continual burden. But these prove to be the very least of her worries when their small island house becomes home to one more...

This novel proved as beautiful inside as out. Salam displayed both a prosaic and yet often unsettling style of voice that made this novel a beautiful yet eerie journey into the unknown, hostile landscape. The depiction of setting, where lush greens give way to unknown depths, and the evocative descriptions of the deadly beauty surrounding the characters made this a truly mesmerizing read. It was often disconcerting to be confronted with such an encroaching quantity of deadly nature, and the reader was thus cleverly twinned to the split-protagonists.

The exploration of religion provided many points of fascinating discourse. Max's fervent belief in his god is at odds with the standard beliefs of the island, and even his wife does not seem to share in his blind faith in the holy father. The world they once inhabited feels like a distant dream, with their present surroundings the new reality, and it was interesting to see the Western construct of Christianity struggle for dominance in a

place so far removed from all the order and constraint they once knew.

Whilst completely absorbing, the slowness of pace started to lag a little, towards the mid-way point. This was a small snag in my overall enjoyment, however, but it did provide a few chapter's worth of turgidity and a slight mar on prior blind adoration with this novel.
