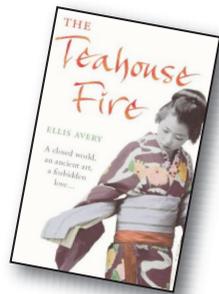


Books / Albums / Listings / Arts / TV/DVD / Cinema

THE TEA HOUSE FIRE Ellis Avery (Vintage, £7.99)

Aurelia is either very lucky or extremely unfortunate – there isn't any other way to summarise her story. Born to a single mother in the 1850s, her early life is a cloistered pattern of tender guidance from her mother, petty hypocrisies from her missionary uncle and the stern supervision of the church. The cadence of this quiet existence is interrupted on her mother's death, when her uncle takes a post in Japan. Snuck into a land which forbade any migration or foreigners, Aurelia soon finds herself alone and needing a new family.

Her welcome into the Shin family gives Aurelia a new fate, in which she falls in love with her young mistress, Yukako, and the tea ceremony. Richly described, Avery's yarn is like the luxuriant kimonos her characters wear – layered, complicated and informed by tradition. Aurelia's struggle to survive in a culture which viewed outsiders as anomalies is delicately drawn. "I" and "they" gradually morph into "we" as she is accepted into the local community.



The "heady brew of sex and human feeling" promised on the cover isn't quite correct – think of it as more of a slow-burning infusion of ritual, change and yearning. The action is more of a constant simmer than broiling passion. The intense art of the tea ceremony (much researched by Avery) is relayed with authority, although all this detail boils slightly to stodge half way through. The quality of the writing never wavers, but Aurelia's unrequited love for Yukako becomes staid. Avery has put so much effort into your investment in the protagonist that Aurelia risks becoming somewhat of a pathetic character.

A pleasing solution is found, however. It's absolutely worth a read for the beautiful prose and evocation of an otherworldly culture, even though *The Tea House Fire* requires stamina for the long haul.

KELLY SALTER

Author Q&A: Jennifer Storm

BLACKOUT GIRL: GROWING UP AND DRYING OUT IN AMERICA (Hazelden, £11.50)

Since graduating from Pennsylvania State University, Jennifer Storm has been involved in several organisations fighting for justice, equality and civil rights. Now director of the Victim/Witness Assistance Programme in Harrisburg, she regularly appears on US media as a spokesperson for victims rights. This memoir is a powerful story about identity, survival and redemption. As well as chronicling the rape and sexual abuse she suffered as a teenager, it highlights her struggle to overcome bulimia, self-mutilation and alcohol and drug addiction.

What led you to write *Blackout Girl* and how long did you spend writing on it?

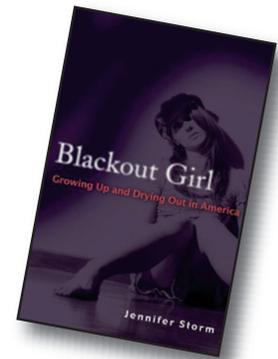
I knew early in my sobriety that I had a story to tell and that I wanted to someday write it all down but it was several years before I actually pulled the thoughts out of my head and put them on paper. I felt compelled to share my story because I realise how blessed I am to be alive, and I feel that I have a purpose to carry my message of survival to others.

Was writing it a difficult or cathartic experience?

Yes and no. It was a lot more painful than I anticipated. I had processed so many of my life experiences in therapy and through a programme of recovery that I assumed it wouldn't be as painful to put these experiences on paper until I started writing. To bring the reader into my life, however, I had to go back into my past and relive every detail of my experiences all over again. There were parts I breezed through and others that were excruciating to write.

Do you think readers who haven't experienced addiction or abuse might find *Blackout Girl* too distressing to finish?

Actually, I think those who have endured similar experiences will have a harder time with it – depending on where they are at in their own personal healing process. I have had many people tell me that at various parts they had to walk away from the book because it touched too close to home for them. I also had one



person compare it to the worst horror novel they ever read even though it has a happy ending. I understand it's a hard read at times, which is why I tried to lighten it where I could.

Wouldn't it wonderful if *Blackout Girl* was included on the curriculum so boys would be more aware from an early age of the physical, emotional and psychological damage caused by rape?

Yes, I think that would be amazing. I am so tired of the education regarding sexual assault and rape being aimed at girls – as though the full responsibility to prevent and deal with rape and assault all lies in our laps, when in fact the opposite is more true. Boys need to understand the impact of their actions and that the societal messages they are receiving about girls aren't always appropriate. In addition, alcohol awareness and sexual assault need to be taught together to both girls and boys.

In rehab, you were encouraged to be honest about your addictions and experiences. What was the most important thing you learnt?

That my secrets will keep me sick! I cannot hold on to things from my past, I must be brutally honest and accountable to myself at all times and in many cases to others in my life.

Do you have any plans to write another book?

Yes, I am in the process of writing the follow-up. The second book will carry the reader through all my hard, early sobriety lessons, discuss how I dealt with many of the issues in *Blackout Girl*, and describe some further victimisation that occurred.

How would you describe your life these days?

Wonderful, full of love, laughter and unimaginable potential.

SARAH-JANE

Off the Shelf

THE LADY GRACE MYSTERIES: INTRIGUE

Grace Cavendish
(Red Fox, £4.99)

An exciting read that follows the diary of Lady Grace, favourite maid of honour of Queen Elizabeth I. Intrigue is a new play about to open in London. It includes a convincing death scene. However, in the debut, performed in front of her majesty, it turns out to be more realistic than planned.

NICKIE UNDERHILL

DANCING WITH DR KILDARE

Jane Yardley
(Doubleday, £14.99)

Protagonist Nina's discovery on the day of her father's death reveals a mystery going back 40 years. This novel weaves together an exploration of Finnish composer Sibelius's retirement from music with a tale of family secrets and mental illness, examining the poignant relationship between past and present.

HOLLY THOMAS

BARNABY GRIMES: RETURN OF THE EMERALD SKULL

Paul Stewart and Chris Riddell
(Doubleday, £8.99)

Barnaby Grimes is on a mission: collect a package from the docks and deliver it to a famous school. But he is against the clock. As he enters Grassington Hall School he senses the terror that is about to be unleashed. Will he make it in time and, more importantly, survive?

NICKIE UNDERHILL

BE THE CHANGE

Trenna Cormack
(Love Books, £12.99)

Tackling political complacency in its many forms, this book's interviewees are living proof of the power of the individual. Collating the experiences of activists, environmentalists and pioneers, Cormack hopes to inspire readers to take up their own fight for change, whether at grassroots or global level.

HOLLY THOMAS