



The Phoenix

Ruth Sims

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Like Tess of the d'Urbervilles or The Woman in White, this Victorian novel is replete with plot twists, years-long detours, providential meetings, villainy, and a great deal of drama. It differs from most other Victorian novels in that the main characters who meet and fall in love are both men, one an adopted son with a dark secret and Dickensian background who has taken on a new identity, and the other an uptight doctor with a strong religious background.

The Phoenix Details

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Author : Ruth Sims

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From Reader Review The Phoenix for online ebook

Peggy says

This is one story you don't want to miss. It had me crying before I got past chapter two and laughing halfway through chapter eight. The book is a marvel of passionate difficulties without ever feeling like an emotional rollercoaster.

There were a few point of view problems with description of what the POV character did not see but they were not severe enough to interrupt the flow. Altogether, the writing is superb, evocative. I found some details a bit jarring, not because they were out of place, but because I was surprised to discover that such things existed so long ago.

The author's research is flawless, her writing tight and uncluttered. This is not a book for skip readers. Every word and comma is essential to the story, which, to this reviewer is exactly as it should be.

The love between St. Denys and Dr. Stuart is subtle, sultry and real; their emotion deep, rugged and lasting. I paused many time to sit back and let the intricacies of the story flow quietly through my mind.

One could not help but laugh at the thought of The Mrs. Aster with diamonds on her knickers.

The Phoenix thoroughly involves the reader. The specifics of both theater and surgery pull the reader into diverse scenes with ease, and hold them there – in the past – with Kit when his worthless excuse for a father comes after him. Tom Roarke is an excellently drawn villain. This reader could not wait to see him meet his end.

By chapter twenty-two, the urge to steal a glimpse at the end is strong and difficult to resist but you must resist it or you'll miss the fun. As with any good drama, just as near unbearable the move toward the finale begins complete with comedy, unexpected misunderstandings and false hints.

Overall, I can't remember when I've ever enjoyed a book so much. Get it. Read it then pass it along. This one is definitely worth sharing [if you can bring yourself to part with it at all]

Peggy Ullman Bell: author Fixin' Things & Sappho sings. <http://peggyullmanbell.com>

Sergey says

Ah, what to say? what to say? At which point did I start not enjoying this unfortunate tale of a romance? At which point did I become disillusioned with its promise? It was when Miss King entered the scene. It was wrong, all wrong – the plotting, the drama, the emotional roller coaster that provided neither relief nor resolution. Everything was *too* much about it! A test of love for naught! Alas! Alas, this blasphemy of misfortune! Away!

Kassa says

This is a beautifully written, intense love story set in late 1880's spanning decades and continents. Clearly well researched and intricately plotted, the book hardly makes a misstep as the love affair between two men is besieged by numerous obstacles and outside influences. The complex characters and engrossing plot combine to create a wonderfully lyrical and moving story which will easily stand the test of time. Fans of literature and historical fiction particularly should be sure to pick this up if you haven't already and anyone hoping to read a fabulous story with complicated situations and flawed characters will want to lose themselves in this book.

The story follows the life of Kit St. Denys, born Jack Rourke, as he struggles during his abusive childhood to being adopted by the wealthy and cultured St. Denys family. As he adapts to a new life in the upper echelons of society and wealth, Kit never forgets his past and is haunted by memories of his father. Those memories are only offset when Kit meets the puritanical Nicholas and begins a love affair that would span years and continents as the two struggle against violence, religion, abuse, jealousy, work, marriage, insanity, and the constant intensity of their emotions. The lovers are apart more than they are together but their need and desire never abate. The two must overcome incredible obstacles for the hope of a future.

The story itself is complex and intricate as the action never stops from start to finish. The main character of Jack, later Kit, centralizes the story and all other characters revolve in his orbit. Even though the story alternates between different perspectives, each action relates to Kit. The beginning could have been extended as it describes Jack's life in the gutter and his relationships to various other people. His early love affair with the theatre is important and beautifully described against the stark contrast to the squalor and violence of his home life. His escape to another life is essential to his survival but his mental health suffers from his experiences and abuse. The incredible reality the writing produces from the gritty slums of London to the lush mansion of St. Denys Hill, the texture and depth to the setting is never sacrificed for the story or characters. This added level of detail adds another layer to the rich narrative.

The characters themselves are wonderfully flawed, complex, and absorbing characters. Kit is a huge personality that leaps off the page in all his over the top, outrageous glory. Yet for all his outgoing personality, his insecurities run deep and his obsession with Nicholas causes him a great deal of pain. His need to be accepted and loved is evident but few touch his carefully guarded heart. He loves his close friends and mixtures comfort and friendship with casual sex, much to Nicholas' anger. Kit is often depicted as rash and selfish but his actions have purpose, even if it's to chase the love of his life or ruin a competitor. The author has delivered a wonderfully complex and complicated character that dominates scenes and demands to be heard even as his story evokes intense emotion and heart ache.

Kit's emotional journey and development drives the story just as Nicholas' path to finding happiness and acceptance hallmarks the beautifully crafted tale. Nicholas is a classic opposite to Kit's debauched and extravagant lifestyle as the puritan who believes deeply in god and religion. Nicholas is often dour and restrained, experiencing no joy or happiness in the endless theatre world of beauty and flirting. He is often jealous and angry at Kit's casual affection for strangers and acquaintances and feels out of place when not working at the surgery. Nicholas often jumps to conclusions and takes the length of the novel to see the depth and complexity of Kit's character. Nicholas' journey is arguably more difficult and complicated as he must come to terms with his relationship with God versus his relationship with Kit. This internal, emotional battle colors a majority of Nicholas' actions and thoughts; only the overwhelming continuous love, need, and desire for Kit break through the strong barrier of Nicholas' guilt and shame.

As brilliant and well written as this story is, there are a few minor problems. I'll stress these were minor as the elements that bothered me may or may not bother other readers. The first was that towards the end of the book, Jack/Kit's past is resurrected and this turns the narrative in a completely different direction involving a lengthy aside about mental health care at its inception. This particular inclusion caused the pace and story to start to drag and although emotional, lacked the deep intensity the story had up until then. This is partly because the resolution is weak and indecisive. The problem gradually is dismissed without a solid

conclusion, leaving the characters and story dangling slightly even as the action continues.

At this point, yet another obstacle is thrown up and the sheer number of miscommunications and poor decisions by the characters starts to overwhelm the story. Although the emotional development of Kit is epitomized by his final decisions and sacrifice he wasn't capable of earlier in the novel, the intensity of the story and deeply moving elements deserved an equally satisfying ending. The narrative draws to a close soon after but the final resolution is wrapped up so quickly, it lacks the fierce passion the story has built. Since the story is unabashedly a romance and complicated love affair between two flawed men, the final two paragraphs are not enough to deliver the satisfaction I was hoping for. That's not to say the ending is a disappointment just that after 375 pages even, I was hoping for more emotional payoff.

Overall this is a lovely piece of historical fiction that is well written with nuanced prose, complex flaws, bold emotion, and intense passion. Although nothing I've said will be new to those who have read and loved the story, I hope new readers are convinced to give this epic love affair a try. You truly won't be disappointed.

Elisa Rolle says

2009 Rainbow Awards Honorable Mention (5* from at least 1 judge)

Blake Fraina says

Traditionally, historical love stories are set against a backdrop of war or political intrigue (think *Gone With the Wind* or any of Mary Renault's many epic novels). As I'm more interested in culture than politics, I've never been much of a fan of this literary genre. That's why it was with surprise and delight that I discovered Ruth Sims's *The Phoenix*. This is a sweeping historical romance that plays out against the theatrical goings on of nineteenth century London and New York. A veritable feast for the true culture maven.

The book's main story concerns the love affair between Kit St. Denys (né Jack O'Rourke), a bright light on London's theatre scene, and Nick Stuart, a goodhearted doctor running a small clinic on the wrong side of town. The reader watches each man painfully wrestle with the demons of his tormented past, Kit as the son of an abusive, alcoholic father and Nick the son of a fanatically religious small town doctor. Acknowledging their forbidden love for one another is only one of the many complications that threaten their happiness. They must also contend with the law, professional triumphs, financial setbacks, long separations, tumultuous relationships, personal loss, even a bout of insanity.

The novel, told in a compulsively readable, straightforward narrative style, is generously populated with engaging, believable characters - some clever inventions, others real life denizens of the nineteenth century theatre scene. I found Sims's detailed depiction of the Theatre Trust, a group that had a stranglehold on the fin de siecle New York theatre world, as particularly fascinating, in light of the parallels one can certainly find between it and the twenty-first century's media conglomerates that all but control our modern airwaves. As they say, the more things change...

This is a book that's difficult to put down. It's informative, romantic, (tastefully) sexy and just rollicking great fun. Plus it has enough twists, traumas and surprises to keep even the most jaded reader on the edge of his seat. The only fault I can find is that some of the book's many characters were not given enough face time nor were several of the secondary relationships fleshed out to my satisfaction. For example, after the death of Nick's fanatical father, he is reunited with his mother from whom he was forcibly estranged. We are only

given a brief glimpse into her new life as a widow in London and her renewed relationship with her son before the story's focus shifts back to the uncertain fate of the romance between Kit and Nick. But this complaint is only a testament to my interest in everyone and everything in the story. All the characters and their lives held me in complete thrall.

Summer's coming, folks. Definitely make room for *The Phoenix* in your beach tote this year.)

Dann says

I never wrote a book review before but after reading some of the others on here I guess I couldn't do much worse because they don't even sound like the same story.

I won't rehash the plot because it's complicated, just the way I like them. Life is complicated! I don't like books that are too easy and wrap everything up with a little pink bow at the end. People get hurt in real life. People get hurt in *The Phoenix*, too--physically and emotionally. Both Dr. Nick and Kit St. Denys grow and change during the course of the story. Their lives and reactions and decisions are changed by forces beyond their control as well as some bad choices that were in their control -- gosh, that's like life too! They're different men than they were when they met. Nick has had to give up something, more than one, really, in order to save Kit.

There's a review by someone named Peggy Bill on here that's written by somebody better than I am at reviewing. This is harder than I thought. Read her review if you want a well written one! But she doesn't like it one bit better than I do.

Dann

Jose says

I bought this book after seeing all the positive reviews and hoping to read an entertaining historical novel. I was sorely disappointed. This book was uninspired and flat just like most pulp romance novels out there. The supposedly victorian setting could be just any old timey idea of such a place, it makes little difference. Drop a few names (Bernard Shaw, Aubrey Beardsley, Florence Nightingale) and you are in business. The descriptions are insipid, the plot lines simplistic and the anachronisms abound just like they do in any romance novel that invokes such backgrounds. Crowds going on holidays were rare events before WWI for example.

The two characters Nick, a country doctor with deep seated christian guilt, and Kit (b. Jack Rourke) , a ruffian transformed into a world-famous and wealthy actor -in no time at all by the way-, are just made of cardboard. Their ascent from poverty and repression is as meteoric and as their fall into lust. The lack of inner life in these two characters, the cliched plots and the tinsel of the environment are too much of a drag for me to care about the story.

Central to the plot are nightmares Kit has regarding his difficult childhood. Only if he sleeps with a man, do these nightmares relent. The implausibility of such extended post-traumatic disorder makes the thickly laid twists of the plot very starchy and contrived. This novel is meant to be a soap-opera with characters driven by single fixations. Caricatures in short.

The book is readable and it has its place. I even has its moments but I felt it was a waste of time in book

form. May be a script would have been better?

The author presents herself as some sort of liberal cookie baking grandma surrounded by conservative folks somewhere in the MidWest. In her spare time she writes these torrid homosexual romance novels. How quaint. Good for her. I wish her much success but I won't be following her career.

Ditteus says

Jack Sue. Pretentious. Maybe one day when I'm running out of books in this genre.

Nene says

This is pretty good, but the ending? Not so much. I felt like the story was wrapped up in a paragraph and I just didn't like the resolution at all. But that could just be me. I'm still giving it high stars, because for all that the ending annoyed me, the rest of the story was enjoyable. Very well developed, with nice depth without being too much.

Alison says

This was great. I enjoyed it.

Miz Love says

The Phoenix begins in London, 1882, with the main character, Jack Rourke, a beautiful young Artful Dodger, straight out of Oliver Twist (a delightful coincidence that Artful Dodger's name was Jack as well, which solidified young Rourke's boyish rogue image in my mind from the first scene).

Jack and his twin, Michael, whose health is frail, are the sons of the demon-in-the-flesh, Tom Rourke. The boys, along with their mother, suffer brutality at the hands of the monster, which eventually leads to tragedy on a wide scale and sends the mother fleeing—without her sons.

As usual, no plot will I divulge; but I will tell you that, early in the book, young Jack finally breaks under the strain of fear and hatred when his despicable, heartless father commits the inevitable crime that you WILL see coming. And this even sets the boy's future into motion, not only propelling him to his life's ultimate course, but implanting the seeds of torment that follow Jack relentlessly throughout the novel. And, as horrible as he is, this sadistic creature, Tom Rourke, is a corrupt thread that weaves deliciously in and out of the story, keeping me on edge with pure, palpable tension. I, like Jack, wondered through the entire story—is he a bad dream, or is he real?

One thing I DO have to reveal is that Jack is taken under the wings of a wealthy family, the St. Denys, where he is pampered, educated, introduced to a life on the stage, and—most importantly and most heart-warming—loved. His name is changed to Christopher “Kit” St. Denys, and he becomes a famous stage presence. Beautiful, talented, cocky, confident, graceful, sexy.

As a result of his nightmarish past, Kit enlists many lovers. Partly for pleasure—as he is quite the sexual aficionado and loves the sensuality of it all—but mostly because he needs strong arms about him to ward off the taunting, merciless nightmares that trail him at night. Desperation to escape these awful visions drive him into his relationships, not love.

At this point, let me say: I have, from the beginning of the novel, fallen in love with Jack/Kit—hopelessly in love. Not only with his beauty, but his spirit of survival, the agonizingly wonderful goodness at his core that is so necessarily and carefully camouflaged by a jaunty nature.

Having said that, I was ecstatic when my beloved Kit met and fell for Nicholas Stuart, the handsome, dark-haired, blue-eyed son of a God-fearing Baptist family.

Nicholas, “Nick”, is very devout, very sexually inhibited. His first encounter with a man was a beautifully depicted, highly sensual, a very sexy portrayal of a young man’s first brush with ‘fornication’: Nick was struck motionless by the sight of Hugh with his trousers down around his ankles. Other than babies he had never seen another human male naked; Hugh was a wonder to behold! When he did not move, Hugh fell to his knees, yanked Nick’s trousers down, and fell upon him, gasping and rubbing hard against him, hard hot flesh against hard hot flesh. Nick shut his eyes tight as the fiery pressure in his groin built up until he thought he would explode. And he did. He let out a raw moan just as Hugh yelled, “Oh, St. Peter-in-the-pocket!” Thick wetness that was not his spewed over Nick’s belly; Hugh collapsed on top of him.

I’ll pause here to quickly say that I adore Sims’ presentation of sex scenes. I can’t put my finger on what makes them so arousing to me, as they certainly are not explicit, but quite controlled. But the fervency that seems to break through the stitches of their very deliberate restraint makes them all the more sensual. Perhaps the tease, like the proverbial preacher’s daughter flashing a thigh from beneath petticoats, or the peek of a man’s taut belly when his shirt slips up—you know, the titillation of the sensual hint which is sometimes a thousand times more powerful than full frontal. It works so well with Sims’ prose. She IS that preacher’s daughter with her wordage. She DOES know the score, but has just the precise talent to deliver the whole show in a very abridged, very sexy version by a careful choice of words.

Back to Nicholas.

Here’s where I will stray from my path of gushing to scratch my head and try to explain what my beautiful Kit saw in Nick, what made him so mad to have him, to keep him. Polar opposite—unadventurous Nick, adventurous Kit. I could not, even by the time I’d finished the book, answer that for myself.

But. Ah. That, my friend, IS the answer. The chilling, beautiful, makes-my-heart-scream I know-I know answer. Do you see? I don’t have to know. Kit has to know, not me.

That very NOT knowing, to me, was the most powerful force in the book. One of the reasons I beg for you to read it, one of the reasons I’ll read it again and again.

Because Sims proved, so eloquently, that love is just love. Period. It has no explanation, it doesn’t have to, it never has, never will. And, damn, that makes me walk on clouds.

That is the key to any good book, any good character—that we can love this character so much, that if he loves something, we’re so invested in him that we will love it, too.

We will gladly scour the world with Kit to connect with Nick every time they’re separated. We might not see what he sees, but he wants it so damn bad, we want him to have it. It is THE thing that makes Kit whole, that makes him safe, makes him happy. What more is there? Who are we to take that from him? Me? I love him so much at this point, I’ll just throw myself off a bridge if Kit cannot have what makes him most content.

Sims (is this going to tell too much?) did throw one element into this story that made me tense—Nick got married. During this era, relations with the same sex were dangerous, but sex with the same sex who also happened to be married was simply impossible.

And Nick's wife was a meek, cheerful, lovely young woman when she fell for him and married him. They even had a child.

Nick's unfaltering devotion to his Kit proved to be the knife that slowly turned in his wife's soul, turning her into a bitter, almost unrecognizable creature. As I sympathized with her, at the same time I loved how Sims allowed her to transform into such hatred that it did not cause me to resent Kit as the dividing force in the marriage. Sims presented the situation in such a way that I could not help but understand how helpless Nick was in trying to do "the right thing". Love, so deep in the heart, cannot die. You can smother it with the pillow of wishful thinking, but it cannot be extinguished.

The reference to the phoenix in the story is to a painting that Kit buys of a phoenix in flames. The phoenix destroys itself in fire of its own making, then gives birth to itself again, endlessly. He saw the painting, and immediately bought it, exclaiming, "He's painted my soul," he whispered. "My very soul." And, yes, by the time you've parted with Kit, when you've closed the book, you will know exactly what he means.

One last thought. Between Ruth Sims and me. Listen, you brilliant author you. I am on to you. You have a pattern, and I have discovered it, blown your cover. You have this unique talent for creating these characters who I should hate. They are so damn cocky, so NOT perfect, I should thrash them about just to knock them down a notch or two. I begin the book, I see so many things about them that I should loathe; and, indeed, I DO try to not like them. But those pesky little characters taunt me from the pages, smirking, hollering, Na-na-na-boo-boo! You do SO like me! You LOVE me!

And go figure. They're right. I DO end up loving them. In fact, I love them the moment I meet them, despite their annoyances, their bristling pride. I picture myself like in the vintage Mark Twain movie where ol' Mark walks off into the sunset with Huck and Tom.

Me? I'm walking off into the sunset with MY new buddies, Kit and Nick. Love you guys.

Thanks for letting me meet them, Ruth.

Simon says

Despairing of this genre, I recently decided to read other reviewers lists of reviewed reads. Something I'd enjoyed and reviewed by others as 4 or 5 stars, I scrolled through reviewers' other reviews. (Did that make sense)?

Anyway, I happened upon a reviewer who is also a writer, someone who writes in depth reviews and chanced my luck.

I'm pleased I did. This novel (a lengthy read) kept me hooked from the first page.

Sick to death of the blatant pornography in the vast majority of the M/M books I've purchased, I found a novel with a good plot, great characters and just enough sexual intimacy to warrant it's inclusion in this genre. I wish more authors would leave the graphic sex to the reader's imagination.

No regrets purchasing this work.

Edina Rose says

This book is a captivating. I could not let go of the characters. The love between the two men is violent, total, intoxicating, demanding but also nurturing, tender, caring, pure. It is simply amazing. Secondary characters are great as well.

And I can't forget the words written by Kit for Nico:

Without the sanction of society
Without the sanction of the church
Without the sanction of God
I love you

Kit tried so hard to stop loving Nico who was so different from him, but he failed. Nico tried so hard to forget Kit, but a wife and a child later, he still couldn't. The connection between them is incredibly strong.

However, no matter how good the story was, I felt like it missed something: transition. Between an important event and the characters response to that event, there was nothing to prepare the reader.. I would have liked the book to go into the head of the character and see what he thinks of the event, how it affects him, before his response to the event. This missing step messed up the flow of the book. But in spite of that, I was able to enjoy the book very much.

Sarah says

Fun but quite predictable and a bit melodramatic. Every victorian cliché is in this book, but it was still fun.

Jeff Erno says

The Phoenix is an epic historical saga that chronicles the lives of two English boys raised at the end of the nineteenth century. Jack Rourke is introduced as a troubled youth living in a ghetto district of London, attempting as best he can to care for himself and his ailing twin brother Michael. The parents of the twins are both abusive, especially Jack's father Tom. He beats his wife and sons mercilessly, until eventually his wife leaves him, abandoning her sons in the process. In a fit of rage, Tom beats his frail son Michael to death. Jack reacts defensively and stabs his father. Then he flees.

Jack befriends a young woman named Lizbet who takes him in. Eventually Jack is adopted by Lizbet's wealthy brother who owns a theatre. Jack changes his name to Kit St. Denys, educates himself, and pursues a

career as an actor.

Nicholas Stuart is the son of a country doctor in a very religious, rural community. Young Nick is groomed from a very young age to eventually take over his father's medical practice. His personal aspirations, however, conflict with his father's wishes. Nick wants to go to university and learn modern medicine, which his father regards as worldly and ungodly. Their disagreement results in a rift in their relationship, and Nick's father ultimately disowns his son.

Jack and Nicholas meet one another in London and almost immediately fall in love. A series of tragedies interferes with their ability to remain together happily, and the story leads the reader down the rocky road of their separations, reunions, and conflicts that arise during the course of their lengthy relationship.

There are so many things that I want to say about this book, that I'm not really sure where to begin. There is no question that the strong writing and meticulous editing of this novel set it apart from most books of the m/m fiction genre. In fact, in terms of literary quality, I would compare the book to the writing of Jeffrey Archer, Maeve Binchy, or Robert McCammon. The writer's voice of this author is magnificent, and the story itself is beautiful.

The plot is riveting and gut-wrenching in manner similar to that of Brokeback Mountain. It is an epic love story in which life circumstances seem to be conspiring to keep the central characters separated from one another, but love somehow always manages to find a way.

The book is so masterfully written that I honestly see it as a major motion picture, or at the very least a television mini-series. It truly is a delightful read which is filled with humor, action, romance, violence, and passion.

The book bravely tackles several meaningful themes, one being that of the turmoil and anxiety that Nicholas endures as related to his religious convictions. Throughout the story he struggles to reconcile his sexual orientation with his religion. Viewed in the historical context of the setting, it is especially poignant. The topic of mental illness and the tragic effects of childhood physical and emotional abuse is also addressed.

Most interesting is the inclusion of numerous historical personalities, inventions, and events. Oscar Wilde makes a cameo appearance. The graphophone, telegraph, and shower bath are brand new technologies which are woven into the plot. The author included extremely interesting details and graphic descriptions which made the setting amazingly real.

I would be remiss if I did not add a couple caveats, however. The book is not a lighthearted m/m romance. If you're expecting a read similar to the writings of Ally Blue, Carol Lynne, or Keta Diablo, this book would not be a wise choice. Secondly, if you have difficulty with a storyline which includes infidelity, this book may be a challenge. In my opinion, the historical setting of the story all but necessitates the infidelity. It made sense to me that in this era it would be assumed that men married women and produced offspring. If they happened to be homosexual, they secretly fulfilled their sexual needs outside the marriage.

Overall, I regard this book as an exceptional read. The prose is beautiful, the storytelling is captivating, and the plot is riveting. It is a must-read.

Erastes says

What a joy to read this book proved to be. From the very first page I was drawn in with the action, was

instantly attracted to the characters and was very impressed how with so few strokes of her pen, Sims managed to draw the situation, the era, the environment and the characters. Language is certainly Sims' gift but she doesn't drown you in it. It's an intelligent read, but steers clear of being a morass where the words become more important than the story itself.

Jack Rourke and his sickly twin brother Michael live by the river in London, picking a living any way they can, (which in Jack's case means a bit of stealing) while they wait for sporadic visits by their father, away at sea. As the boys grow they dread his visits more and more, as Rourke is increasingly violent, both to them and to their mother. Matters come to a head with such a violent visit that Jack is forced to flee, and friends he has made in local theatre take him in.

The book is marginally longer than some of the books I've read recently, but there are points (like this early section) where I'd like it be even longer. I felt it – wasn't rushed, exactly – but I'd have like to have seen more of this early life explored in the same lush detail that Sims goes on in other sections of the book. Jack's (soon to renamed Christopher, and then Kit – and yes, this is important) rise from guttersnipe to an heir of a small fortune and a damned good actor could have been padded out and I wouldn't have minded a bit. He had a worrying tendency to be a little Sue-ish, or tainted with "Woman-of-Substance-itis" but I overlooked that for he does have faults, and these are brought into sharp relief when he meets Nicholas, a dour doctor – brought up in a strict religious environment who has fallen quite in love with Kit without Kit knowing.

It's a lovely seduction and love affair, Kit's licentiousness is contrasted starkly with Nick's puritanical ideals and when the inevitable happens and both behave far too much like themselves for either of them to forgive each other..... Well – I don't want to do too many spoilers, but this is where the book really kicks in.

Characterisation: Is great. I could really get under the skin of both main characters without any problem. Even when she shifted between one and the other, it was so starkly contrasted – the difference in their characters – that you simply thought as one then the other. While Nick's choices made me want to brain him, they made perfect sense in the world he inhabited, and that's the true test of a good homosexual historical for my money. Ruth doesn't stick modern day characters in Victorian clothes, everything they do, even the much more openly shocking Kit – is coloured by what society thought and what society would and could do. It wasn't quite as dangerous for men in 1890 as it was in 1820 – you weren't hanged: but you still risked prison, disgrace and being exiled from polite society – even more rigid than it had been 150 years before. Sims shows the "salons" of the aesthetes – where the only safe place for a gentleman of a certain persuasion to meet others was in the drawing rooms of his friends.

Kit is larger than life throughout, and that's perfectly in character, even when his life spirals out of control, it's in a wonderfully tragedian way with Nick hardly able to keep up.

Period Feel: Wonderfully done, with no Dan Brown tub-thumping explanations of what is going on and the politics of the time. Sims doesn't talk down to her reader. For someone who self-admittedly has rarely ventured from her own corner of the USA, to be able to recreate Victorian slums is pretty impressive.

Sexual Level. Warm and erotic, without being graphic in any way, a true lesson to me in less is more.

Summing Up. Very highly recommended. Certainly the best written gay historical I've read since *At Swim Two Boys*, and a book that convinces me that I can do better with my own prose. This is not a "romance" btw, chaps – so while I'm giving no clues to the ending, I adored it, because it left me guessing right up until the very last chapter. It's a real keeper.

Sylvester Kuo says

The Phoenix is a rather cute little book, albeit a little bit pretentious. I will explain. So essentially it's gay romanc fiction set in the 1880 spreading over decades, Kit is a former convict whom, like Pip in The Great Expectations, inherited a large fortune and a theatre business in which he is both the owner and the lead actor. Nick on the other hand grew up in a small village and became a doctor to help the poor in urban ghetto. Kit is a libertine who is looking for something different while Nick struggles with his Christian faith.

Throughout the novel the characters come across various historical figures like Oscar Wilde for instance which some may say added to realism but I would say it made me cringe a little. But as for the writing, it was rather good for a genre like this.

Linny says

If u want to read an intense but realistic love story, you're on the right page..

The story is messy, the characters are flawed.. but that's how life is.. you will find yourself tsking.. you will glower at Nick many times.. but you will come to love him as much as Kit as you go along..

It's a refreshing storyline.. how I can't explain because afterall it has the same angsty main characters which was sometimes irritating.. but I still couldn't leave the book, I was actually glued to it..

So yes some people might not like it.. but if you like your stories real with complexities of life taking its toll on people, then you will like it.. I know i did!!

sailorstarsun says

Quite possibly one of the best stories I've ever read.

Wendy says

M/M romance is not my usual genre, but a friend's recommendation got me interested in this one. She praised the research into the period (Victorian / early Edwardian) in both England and America, in the divergent spheres of theatre and medicine, and I agree with her there. She also observed that there's a lot going on, and the latter half of the book feels a bit overloaded with possibilities that are then rushed past, and I agree with her there, too.

What I thought worked: Characterization, setting, and clean, easy to read prose with occasional flashes of evocative brilliance ("hillsides buttered with daffodils and jonquils", encountered only once and early in the book, stuck with me to the end). I liked that the story was about real, believable people, and that it was about *love* in all its forms, and not just about steamily-described sex between impossibly good looking people. The story developed and illustrated all the relationships in two people's lives, including the unpleasant and adversarial ones, to demonstrate how we become who we are partly because of who surrounds us. Secondary characters - especially Nick's wife - are well-rounded and credible and sympathetic, even if they're not "for"

the romantic pairing.

What didn't quite hit the mark for me: This is a romance, and yet the two romantic leads don't even meet until about Chapter Six. The first five chapters are spent detailing the life of one protagonist, literally from birth to age 26, and Chapter Six (I think it was 6) starts with the birth of the other protagonist! All of this is backstory, authorial throat-clearing, and although some of it's crucial to the story, I think it could have been woven in to the narrative more effectively than in a six-chapter opening infodump. Conversely, there was also a good deal of telling rather than showing in many places, and events were summarized that might have served the story better had they been detailed.

The revelation [here's the spoiler:] that Kit's allegedly dead father is in fact not dead felt oddly handled, and rather *deus ex machina* overall. Tom Rourke is revealed - only to the reader - to have survived his son's attempted stabbing, and to be bent on revenge, but once he has the means to put his plan to go to America into action, he instead drinks and whores away his funds, then gets arrested and sentenced to five years in prison. Why the delay? What's the point of that, if only the reader knows that there's a threat lurking somewhere? It doesn't really increase the tension to have him 'alive but incarcerated offscreen', and the murderous escape from prison (which served primarily to provide a murder weapon to be used later) didn't do it either.

Without the recommendation from my friend, I'm not sure I would have stuck with this book beyond the first chapter, to be honest. Or I might have flipped forward until I found the other protagonist's name, and given it another chance from there.
