



The Spoiler

Annalena McAfee

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There are two sides to every story.

Two women journalists - one old, one young, one a veteran war correspondent, the other a writer of celebrity gossip - meet for the first time. It is January 1997, the dying days of John Major's government, and newspapers, fighting for a dwindling readership, are plunging downmarket amid wild rumours that the internet is about to change the world for ever. Honor Tait (b. 1917), one of the most renowned journalists of her era, is haunted by her past; Tamara Sim (b. 1970), who compiles lists of what's in and what's out for *Psst!*, the weekend entertainment supplement of *The Monitor*, is struggling to secure her future, at any cost, in an increasingly precarious industry. When Sim is sent to interview Tait, their mutual incomprehension generates a rich seam of dark comedy. But when their different worlds finally collide, the consequences are devastating.

McAfee's trenchant first novel is part satire, part portrait of an era poised unknowingly on the brink of a technological revolution. New Labour is about to take over, newspapers are increasingly obsessed by the private lives of popstars, models and footballers, and Honor Tait and her kind are an endangered species. But is Tait really such a beacon of truth and integrity? And, as this darkly witty novel asks, is compassion the first casualty in the search for a good story?

The Spoiler Details

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From Reader Review The Spoiler for online ebook

Mary Ann says

This book was recommended by NPR so I thought ,I'll try it. I was so disappointed that I didn't finish it. I would read a paragraph and then say what did I just read and have to go back and read it again.I wasn't impressed with McAfee's McWordiness. I think a good newspaper editor would have cut out half of what she wrote before going to press.

One word:
pretentious!

Eliza says

9/19/11: In my ongoing quest to know ever more about Ian McEwan, I read The Spoiler, by his wife, Annalena McAfee. I learned nothing about McEwan, or McAfee, as far as I can tell (beyond her thank you to him in the Acknowledgements), though I am glad I read it--if only to say I did. McAfee is a competent, articulate writer, but her story, which is supposed to be darkly comic and archly melodramatic, was a bit lost on me. Too much inside understanding of the British world of journalism is required, and I know I missed a lot. And it dragged a bit, especially the first half; while I get that she was trying to set up the great conflagration at the end very carefully (not a spoiler to say so, I think), she didn't need to do so quite so carefully. She did a too good job of making Honor Tait almost completely unloveable, and of making Tamara Sim slightly pathetic--while I think she meant to do that, in the name of satire and sendup of the whole business, it backfired on me--I didn't care about them, or what happened to them, so why read the book? Still, I enjoyed the story, and the end was very satisfying, and McAfee has a good sense of language and humor. (or should I say humour?)

Kay says

Loved the sentences with nary a padding, every word tells, counts for something. Rhythm of writing great with changes for two points of view. And so sobering, this book, how tabloid attacks made of curdled-whipped-cream lies can ruin lives and leave sterling reputations tarnished--we know it, but watching it hurts a lot. The way old age shreds the ego of the public achiever, or any of us, leaving a competent, renowned person a shell, yes, like the film, "The Artist." The way feckless youth can scythe through a worthy life and go drink champagne after. Respect as a lost concept. Dignity as a cape. Honor and Tamara --memorable in torment. Well done!

librarianka says

Upon the first reading of this book I was struck by how unsympathetic and unlikable the main characters were. However I read this book twice and having gained more distance towards the characters on the second reading I was more accepting of their faults and transgressions. I enjoyed this in depth study of the newspaper world and its protagonists - the journalists. I cringed at the methods used by contemporary tabloid producers whose main goal is to find a scandal and implicate their victim by all means and measures.

However the iconic Honor Tait, the intrepid woman reporter whose credits included interviewing Franco and reporting from the trenches of many different wars, turned out to be utterly human and consequently full of faults. The contrasting of the two women reporters, old hand Honor Tait (character that could be loosely based on life of Martha Gellhorn given the many similarities) and young and flaky Tamara Sim who gets the assignment to interview the famous Honor, worked really well. When we meet them they appear as if belonging to two different universes but In the end we find out that both women harbor dark secrets and are not exactly as dissimilar as they appear on the surface. I enjoyed the dark humor in the book and the beautiful prose. I found the portrayal of the decline and old age as represented in embittered Honor Tait quite devastating.

Jen says

Ugh, I cannot recommend this book at all. The main character was snobby and unlikeable, the writing was dense, and the author used so many elaborate SAT words and references I felt like I needed a dictionary next to me for every paragraph. I kept waiting for something to happen, bearing through this novel, and nothing did. The "cliffhanger" at the end was the most obvious reveal. Such an odd way to treat a reader by trying to impress him/her with this ridiculously elitist writing then dumbing down a narrative by making it the easiest "mystery" in the world. I do not know how it received such great reviews.

Abigail Padgett says

Writers really shouldn't write reviews, Readers should write reviews even though writers are also readers. It's an ethical quagmire out of which I crawled momentarily because this book is such a delight!

THE SPOILER, packed with wry wit in nearly every sentence, is in actuality a stealth Aristotelian tragedy. Except the "flawed character" lies not in the protagonist(s), but in a populist voyeurism that devours celebrity scandals like popcorn while remaining unable to find Pakistan on a map. THE SPOILER freeze-frames that tottering moment of critical mass in the late 1990's, just before "news," along with the Western social contract, changed overnight.

The novel is a tale of two journalists – 79-year-old Honor Tait, in her time a brilliant war correspondent famous both for her reports from now-iconic fronts and for her dazzling beauty, three husbands and countless affairs, and Tamara Sim, a ditzy young freelancer of seemingly deranged educational background who ekes out a living writing tabloid fill like, "The Pits: Underarm Hair Horror of the Stars!"

In a basement cubicle, Tamara pens shock-jock for Psst!, the Saturday sleaze column of The Monitor, a fictional London newspaper whose denizens and business practices are described with a droll, satiric edge. (If Virginia Woolf were to come back as a humorist, she would write this book.) In contrast, the savaged-by-time Honor struggles alone in a cluttered apartment to confront personal secrets shared with no one now alive. Through an email programming glitch, Tamara is given the plum assignment – a single, coveted interview with the arrogant, reclusive "doyenne of British journalism." What ensues is a contemporary comedy of errors through which the reader laughs appreciatively on every page while remaining sensible of an underlying sadness. Something is vanishing. It will not be seen again.

American readers will stumble over some of the British idioms and cultural references, and a melodrama-

style tendency toward unlikely coincidence occasionally jars, but these are quickly subsumed in the sheer delight of the narrative voice. This is a writer's novel, the structural scaffolding dead obvious and elegant, the insider intelligence fairly shimmering. The most inconsequential sentence turns out to be quotable.

Honor's third (jealously possessive and American) husband Tad, for example, is captured in a tiny vignette about the choice of a frame for a Cocteau sketch given to Honor by the artist during their brief affair. "But the proprietorial husband, furious that his wife, whom he had married in their middle years, had ever been close to anyone else, lost out to his peculiarly American deference to fame. It was Tad who eventually chose the unwieldy ebony frame, after a degree of contemplation and dialogue that would not have discredited Plato..."

Annalena McAfee, veteran journalist and editor, knows the world whereof she writes, and writes of it dashingly. But the "pity and terror" are also there, understated and without fanfare, in the hidden lives of both Honor and Tamara. The end of THE SPOILER brings no Aristotelian catharsis; it can't. The end of this story is the beginning of a new one, the one we're in.

JayLando says

A period piece about Journalists...

If that sounds interesting, you will enjoy this book.

As a time capsule of when new media and the Internet was beginning to transition into super power it is engaging; and doubly so as a contrast of journalistic styles.

Told from a point of view of a up-and-comer bred on gossip & the cult of celebrity and a former in-the-trenches award winning Journalist in the twilight of her life.

I used the iPad dictionary quite a bit... at least as much as the author used a thesaurus, but I enjoyed that.

The story gets more interesting and twisty but it is totally worth reading. It begins a bit slow but once I got into it was a real page turner.

Lorri Steinbacher says

The story gave interesting insight into the media machine, but I found Tamara to be more of a caricature than a character. Honestly, could someone be so completely vapid and unself-aware? Probably, but I'd hate to believe it. Honor rang a little more true, but the Tamara's character was so cartoonish that it pulled me out of the story.

Stephanie Patterson says

Honor Tait is a elderly, renowned war correspondent; Tamara Sim is a freelance tabloid journalist who is used to doing stories on "The & Worst Bad Hair Days." They meet for an interview when some of Ms. Tait's

journalism is to be re-issued and they don't get along. Ms. Tait feels that Ms. Sim doesn't know anything. She's right of course. When Tait mentions the 38th parallel, Sim can only wonder "Parallel to what?". But Sim feels Tait is just as ignorant. She's right as well. Tait is ignorant of what is currently fancied by the newspaper reading public. They want juicy details of private life. What could a readership raised on a steady diet of people who are famous for being famous care about real achievement and reporting on events they don't remember?

Anxious to make a mark at a glossy, prestigious magazine supplement, Tamara is determined to dig up some dirt. There is dirt of a sort to be dug. However, the story she breaks is not true and is not significant to Honor Tait. Honor's shame is attached to something did (or failed to do) as a journalist.

This is a funny serious book. The interplay between journalists (if you can call them that) in the newsroom and the relationship between Honor and Tamara are fascinating.

And Tait's observation that the people currently covering what they see as news combine great ignorance with great confidence seems to me right on the mark.

eb says

The story of two delightfully detestable journalists: a callow young philistine, and a cynical old pro. The inside-baseball details about newspaper life are wonderful, as is the black humor. But the plot drags along like a dying cat. There are two central mysteries: what horrible thing did the old lady do as a young writer? And who is the mysterious young man she keeps meeting with? Both solutions are 1) extremely dull, and 2) entirely predictable. Not recommended.

Joanna says

Spoiler! This book has a dull, repetitive, plodding plot that almost grudgingly builds up to a predictable climax.

Mark says

London in the late 1990s. Honor Tait, a Martha Gellhorn-style pioneer woman journalist who covered WWII, the Korean War, the Vietnam War and interviewed heads of state and celebrities, is nearing 80 and has a publisher who is trying to revive interest in her by republishing her major stories.

Tamara Sim is a 20-something journalist more comfortable with writing lists about celebrities than committing serious journalism, which she finds boring and out of date. But she is ambitious, and takes on what she thinks will be her ticket to a better life -- a profile of Tait for the classy Sunday section of her newspaper.

Out of these materials Annalena McAfee fashions a waspish look at the decline of modern journalism, while also creating sharply drawn characters. Tamara Sim is easy to sneer at, with her lack of historical knowledge (she wants to make sure to include a reference to TS Eliot as the man who wrote "Cats") and her shaky grasp of ethics. But McAfee manages to make us care for her, in part because she is trying to rescue her drug abusing brother and in part because she suffers so many indignities in her quest for status. And while Honor Tait is much easier to like at a journalistic level, she is not so sterling as a person, having been every bit as

ambitious, and having shown very little common sense in her choice of husbands or her most momentous personal decision, revealed as the book goes along.

The "spoiler" in the title is a scoop in which one British news organization undercuts another's exclusive by getting there first or ruining the other paper's angle. Tamara becomes both the victim and perpetrator of spoilers in this novel. And while the big reveal that is driving the plot is not particularly surprising or salacious, that doesn't really matter, because McAfee's main goal seems to be to satirize the state of the industry as it emerged into the Internet age, and she does that with acidic vigor.

Amy says

What a disappointment. This could have been wonderful but McAfee didn't develop her characters or the story line enough to make them at all believable. I did learn some new vocabulary words:

hermeneutic

chthonic

crepuscular

I always appreciate good vocabulary but in this case it seems as if McAfee was showing off her vocabulary to mask her prosaic and hackneyed plot (right back at you, McAfee)

Anita says

It's the late 90's in London. Two women, one the grande dame of journalism. She has witnessed and reported on every war, dictator, international crisis since WWII with a Pulitzer prize. The other, an up and coming journalist who creates celebrity lists each week (Best soap cat fights, worst dental makeovers, etc.). They cross paths and great writing ensues. McAfee pokes fun at tabloid journalism in those days just before the internet takes over. Actually, more than pokes fun--serves as a warning, sendup, and cautionary tale of what passes for reporting today. Yes, the Cruise/Holmes divorce was in the "hard news first half hour" of Today and GMA this morning. The writing is fantastic, the vocabulary incredible, and very funny, especially when mining the depths of current celebrity journalism. And what is a spoiler? When a competing news organization spoils another's exclusive story by beating them to it or discrediting it before it hits the press. Spoiling is what has happened to news so that it stinks more than the fish it wraps.

Stephanie says

This started well but was ultimately disappointing. I really enjoyed reading about British journalism in the late 1990s, esp. since I was involved in American journalism at that time. I also thought it would be fun to read about a female journalist in the 1940s & beyond. However, the "doyenne of British journalism" turned into the same kind of disappointing writer that the tabloid chick was -- or maybe it was just McAfee who couldn't write well. I'm not sure - but I wanted to like this much more than I did.
