



Memory of Water

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Global warming has changed the world's geography and its politics. Wars are waged over water, and China rules Europe, including the Scandinavian Union, which is occupied by the power state of New Qian. In this far north place, seventeen-year-old Noria Kaitio is learning to become a tea master like her father, a position that holds great responsibility and great secrets. Tea masters alone know the location of hidden water sources, including the natural spring that Noria's father tends, which once provided water for her whole village.

But secrets do not stay hidden forever, and after her father's death the army starts watching their town-and Noria. And as water becomes even scarcer, Noria must choose between safety and striking out, between knowledge and kinship.

Imaginative and engaging, lyrical and poignant, *Memory of Water* is an indelible novel that portrays a future that is all too possible.

Memory of Water Details

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Author : Emmi Itäranta

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From Reader Review Memory of Water for online ebook

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I read this because it was nominated one month for the Sword and Laser book club but lost to a book I had already read.

There are elements of this novel to like. The combination of Scandinavian and Chinese culture for the society of New Qian was really the best part, especially the section combining the northern lights with the Chinese festivals. Beautiful! Magical!

The theme of water scarcity is frequent these days, although having a teamster in each village/town/city with the secrets of the water was a new twist.

I felt like much of the writing itself was repetitive, somehow separated from the true emotion of the story. Even in moments that I felt should have great despair, it felt like Noria was floating through life. Strange.

Discussed on Episode 037 of the Reading Envy podcast.

Jim says

Itäranta is a Finnish author, and as I understand it, she wrote the book in both Finnish and in English, and it's been published in both languages. Speaking as an author, let me tell you, that's pretty badass.

Here's the publisher's summary:

"In the far north of the Scandinavian Union, now occupied by the power state of New Qian, seventeen-year-old Noria Kaitio studies to become a tea master like her father. It is a position that holds great responsibility and a dangerous secret. Tea masters alone know the location of hidden water sources, including the natural spring that once provided water for her whole village. When Noria's father dies, the secret of the spring reaches the new military commander ... and the power of the army is vast indeed. But the precious water reserve is not the only forbidden knowledge Noria possesses, and resistance is a fine line. Threatened with imprisonment, and with her life at stake, Noria must make an excruciating, dangerous choice between knowledge and freedom."

This book was at times powerful and beautiful and tragic and depressing and triumphant. There's not a great deal of action. The pace is almost leisurely at times, even as the tension ratchets every higher. Day by day Noira goes about her business, watching helplessly as the military imprison and execute others in the village for water crimes. The waiting builds suspense and fear far more effectively than any series of graphic action or violence would have. There's also the contrast between the horrors Noira witnesses and the beauty of Itäranta's writing.

And then there's the worldbuilding. The book is set in a post-apocalyptic Finland. Rising sea levels and other environmental catastrophes have eliminated most sources of fresh water and a serious, if uneven, regression in technology. We never get the full details about what happened, because Noria — like most people — doesn't know the truth. She knows only the stories she's been taught. But over the course of the book, she uncovers bits and pieces...

I'm sure that aspect of the book will come across as preachy to some, and there's certainly a message here about waste and overconsumption and the environment. But given that we don't even know the full details of what happened, it felt like a reasonable example of "If this goes on..." to me.

There's also beauty here. The way Noria contemplates every detail of the tea ceremony, and the ideas and philosophy behind it. I don't know enough to say whether or not the author's description is accurate, only that it was beautifully written. There's love as well. Noria's relationship with her friend Sanja, who works as a plastic smith (digging up and repairing old plastic for the village) is a powerful source of conflict. While they love one another, the secrets Noria guards and the struggles they both face just to survive would strain any relationship.

Evie says

Check out my Pinterest Inspiration Board!

Filled with philosophical themes, existentialism and moments of pure beauty, *Memory of Water* is a highly original, remarkably intelligent and infuriatingly teasing work of speculative fiction set in a dystopian world.

What we have here is a sad and hopeless world driven to the brink of extinction by its own inhabitants; humans. The global warming caused all the ice to melt, overflowing the oceans. The earth is scorched, the heat is almost unbearable, and the drinking water is almost impossible to get. Those who have access to it, hold all the power. The government is rationing the purified sea water, making sure people get only enough to survive, and executing those desperate enough to dig illegal wells and water pipes.

Memory of a Water tells the story of tea master's daughter, Noria, as she is charged with keeping a life-changing secret. A secret of a hidden fresh water spring, guarded by generations of tea masters.

The setting, the customs and the unique Scandinavian atmosphere make this story feel exotic and fresh. The characters - oddly calm and focused in times of such desperation and thirst - surprise the reader with their coldly calculated decisions and peaceful acceptance of their fates. The plot line flows lazily like a stream of arctic fresh water - it speeds up rarely, it offers very few twists and instead of smashing into a dam, it flows into the ocean, offering no definite ending or clear conclusion to the story. On top of all that, while this book is supposedly written with teen readers in mind, I would not dare categorize it as YA fiction. It's neither YA nor adult story, it's simply its own thing. Frankly, I don't believe readers who are used to reading fast-paced, action-packed YA blockbusters will find this book to their taste. It's on the slower, more contemplative side, with no clearly marked boundaries and completely unconventional construction. I don't think I have ever read anything quite like it, but I think fans of Japanese fiction (Haruki Murakami, Yukio Mishima, Abe Kobo), or, say, Paolo Coelho and José Saramago, will have more luck with it. In other words, it's more of a book for those who appreciate non-commercial, lyrical, meditative part-contemporary, part-SciFi cautionary tales.

Reading *Memory of Water* was definitely an enriching experience for me. I was drawn to this bleak and yet somehow beautiful world. The gentle and evocative style of the prose and the fascinating tradition of the tea ceremony contrasted with the injustice, the cruelty and the suffering depicted in this story, made for a fascinating read. I am very upset that there will be no sequel, for there are so many questions demanding to be answered, it's almost maddening. And yet, in a way, I understand why Itaranta decided to leave an open ending and so many secrets left undiscovered. In the end, this story is like water itself, "it exists beyond all beginnings and ends".

David Holmes says

This is a book club read that I would probably never have heard of otherwise. It's a sort of post-apocalypse dystopia, but not quite like any I've read before.

For the first 200 pages, I was enjoying it quite a bit. The setting had some serious plausibility issues, but I was able to overlook them because I was engaged and curious about the world. Unfortunately in the latter half of the book, some things happened that started to really annoy me.

I see that this book is labeled "young adult" by some. I don't read much YA and it's never been clear to me what exactly makes a book "YA", but for the first half of the book I wasn't seeing it here. Now, I'm beginning to think "YA" actually means "young characters who act precisely as stupid as the plot requires of them at any given time".

After the protagonists start making bad decisions in order to carry the plot along, I lost my immersion in the story. When that happened, the problems with plausibility that I had ignored up to that point started to seem more and more ridiculous.

This is a 3-star book that should have been a 4-star book.

Now, for the spoilery rant:

(view spoiler)

Finally, Noria says about her mother's books:

Many of them spoke of temperatures and seasons and weather, drowned land and oceans that had pushed their shorelines inland, and all of them spoke of water, but the books didn't always agree on everything. I asked my mother once what this meant. She called herself a scientist. If scientists didn't agree with each other, I asked, did this mean that nobody really knew? She thought about this for a while and then said that there were different ways of knowing, and sometimes it was impossible to say which way was the most reliable.

What unscientific baloney.

There are many, many ways of *believing*, but there are actually very, very few ways of *knowing*, and precisely one of them is science, and it ONLY way of knowing the things within its magisteria. Scientists understand the difference between what they *believe* and what they *know*, and between what they *know* and what they *hypothesize*, and between what they *hypothesize* and what they *theorize*, and they understand varying degrees of certainty and degrees of probability. When two scientists disagree, it's not because they have competing methods of knowing the truth; it's because they have competing imperfect approximations of the truth. Either one or (almost always) both of them doesn't 100% *know*, but that doesn't mean they 100% *don't know* either. Scientists have to live in the gray area between *knowing* and *not knowing*, but should never wander into the realm of *believing*.

I'm not docking points for this paragraph, because it's not an important part of the book and I don't think the things *characters* say should necessarily be considered views of the *author*. I think it's important to mention, though, because this is a book about global warming, and Noria's mother's answer will likely be read as a commentary on science today. And it's nonsense.

Nicki says

In a future of our world where the polar ice caps have melted, and the maps have been redrawn as nations disappear under salt waves, potable water has become a scarce resource, and the citizens of the New Qian-ruled Scandinavian Union thrive -- barely -- on desalinated water rationed by the government. The penalties for water crimes are harsh; for concealing and tapping a fresh spring, they are deadly. Noria Kaitio's family have guarded the spring for generations, and when Noria turns 17, her father, the village tea master, brings her into the secret of its maintenance as he prepares to inaugurate her as the next tea master.

Memory of Water is one of my favourite things: A novel in which the setting is, if not yet apocalyptic, certainly trending that way, but the tale told is an intimate one. This is not about humanity's grand escape from the brink of annihilation. It's about a young woman and her family and how they preserve civility in a culture where it is constantly threatened by desperation. The secret of the spring and the decisions that have to be taken to preserve it are important, but equally important is the role of tea master, of the elaborate rituals preserving peace and politeness, of providing the luxury and companionship of the tea house. This is a world where every cup is precious, and the tea masters elevate the partaking of it into something precious as well.

We don't get to see a lot of how this world came to be, because much of that story is lost to the people living in it as well, so the world beyond the village is painted in broad strokes. The fusion of Chinese and Finnish culture, along with the preoccupation with water brought about by the times, would be fascinating to see more of, but a more detailed approach might have cost the novel some of the ethereality which contrasts so movingly with the desperation of the circumstances it describes. When it is showcased, though, it leads to such striking imagery as the Moonfeast and the Ocean-Dragons.

I didn't find the message at all heavy-handed. It's obvious that you cannot write a novel about a water-starved future without the consequences of global warming becoming starkly clear, but the author doesn't bang the drum, the tone being mournful rather than urgent. This is a future where the battle is lost, and the people of that future give us about as much consideration as we're giving them. Certainly compared to novels like **The Windup Girl** or Kim Stanley Robinson's Capitol trilogy, the didacticism is light.

I found Noria most interesting in her relationships with others. We're treated to a lot of her inner self, but internally I found her difficult to relate to until the end drew near, as she has an emotional distance that's not

unfitting. She's like one of those people who, even in the peak of health, seems to be in the process of dying, and whose life is primarily a sequence of letting go. In this, she's the ideal representative of the humanity of her time. One of the reasons I really liked her friendship with Sanja is because Sanja seemed to spark moments of life back into her, despite her own troubles, just by being present. At the Moonfeast, for a moment, they get to lay aside this ruined world and just be girls, and it's as beautiful as Ocean-Dragons. Another is the way they encompassed the realistic strain of a friendship involving poverty and comparative wealth, which here is the illicit wealth of water, but didn't let it tear them apart even though the world around them might.

Emmi Itäranta's prose alone makes the book a treat to read. It's delicate and sublime, and the whole work feels laced with sorrow. It's all the more impressive that Itäranta wrote the manuscript in two languages -- she penned both the Finnish and English editions of the novel. That this is also her debut novel in both languages makes it a stunning accomplishment.

Memory of Water has earned its place on my favourites shelf, and I'll be awaiting the author's next work with great interest.

Review from Bookette.net

rameau says

Imagine you're listening to the radio. A song comes up you've never heard before. You don't know the band, but you like the quiet, melancholic melody. You stop to listen and the more you do, the more you like it. Except, you're waiting for the song to take flight. You're waiting for something to happen, something to take the song to the next level and surprise you. It never happens.

That's what happened to me with this book. I wanted to like it better than I did.

Itäranta writes beautifully, but her story also falters and stumbles on preachiness in the beginning. She uses repetition and a book ending for this small story that—unfortunately—remains small. I didn't feel like Itäranta made the oppression and horrors of a dry future awful and dejected enough to justify the lie told in the epilogue. I didn't feel like she'd earned it.

I mentioned the preachiness. It seems to be contagious. Every (other or third) Finnish book that I pick up seems to somehow describe the horrors of natural disasters and a future we as a human race have squandered. That's fine message to be told, but I don't appreciate being forced to swallow the utter condemnation of men while turning the pages. After all, these are authors living in today's world relying on peddling their wares to the very people burying their childrens' children in plastic tombs if these authors are to be believed.

I love the fact that Finnish and Scandinavian authors in general seem to trust their readers' intelligence, but I wish they trusted us a bit more. A refrain repeated endlessly is never as effective as a slow realisation coming from within.

If you've read the book, you might think my review slightly contradictory, but it's not. Part of it is criticising the what and a part of it is criticising the how. In both, I was expecting more than I got.

Still, this novel falls on the side of "OK" rather than "bad but didn't hate it" of my two star rating.

Maryam says

it could be such a brilliant book, but unfortunately it wasn't. I enjoyed it though, actually I enjoyed the writing, the era, the environment but the story has too many flaws, secrets, dark holes...

The story set in a dystopian world. Due to global warming all ices are melted and apparently contaminated. Now military control remaining water resources and having any secret well or spring or water pipe is a serious crime.

Noria is daughter of a tea master in a small village. Tea masters are watchers of water and normally the know of hidden springs. Noria is trained to be a tea master herself and everything looks normal until a new military commander set his foot for a Tea ceremony into their house and find the water too fresh to be coming from pipes.

The writing in this book is so beautiful that you want to continue reading and it's such a waste that this good idea, this good writing was weakened by details of the story.

Ian Mond says

What's It About

The novel is set years into the future where global warming and rising seas has seen the destruction of cities, the takeover of Europe by China and the scarcity of fresh water.

Noria Kaitio is learning to become a tea master like her father which comes with its own responsibilities. One of which is knowledge of a hidden source of fresh water that used to supply the town but is now kept secret from the military. But for how long...

It's worth noting that Memory of Water was originally published in Finland in 2012. Emmi Itaranta took on the task of translating her own novel for its English-language publication.

Should I Read It?

Yes. If the gorgeous writing doesn't pull you in, the compelling story will. Itaranta doesn't shy away from the moral conundrum Noria faces once she becomes responsible for the spring. Does she keep it secret – and therefore keep it out of the clutches of the military – or does she reveal her secret, on possible pain of death, to support a village that is slowly dying from a lack of purified and desalinated water? This choice, and Noria's eventual decision provides the novel with a real sense of danger and tension.

And did I mention that the prose is beautiful?

Representative Paragraph

Noria's father reveals a hidden spring of fresh water...

"Water rushed from inside the rock in strings and threads and strands of shimmer, in enormous sheets that shattered the surface of the pond at the bottom of the cave when they hit it. It twisted around the rocks and curled in spirals and whirls around itself, and churned and danced and unravelled again. The surface trembled under the force of the movement. A narrow stream flowed from the pond towards the shelf of stone that the doorway we had come through was on, then disappeared into the ground under it. I could see something that looked like a white stain on the rock wall above the surface of the water, and another lever in the wall further away. My father urged me on, to the edge of the pond.

'Try it,' he said. I dipped my fingers in the water and felt its strength. It moved against my hand like breathing, like an animal, like another person's skin. It was cold, far colder than anything I was used to. I licked my fingers carefully, like I had been taught to do since I was very young: never drink water you haven't tasted first. 'It's fresh,' I said. Lantern light folded on his face when he smiled, and then, slowly, the smile ran dry."

Commentary

I want to make it clear from the outset that I really liked *Memory of Water*. The writing is beautiful and Noria Kaitio is a likeable and well-rounded character. But I couldn't help but wonder whether I was allowing Itaranta's gorgeous, delicate prose to distract me from her hazy, nebulous world building. In particular, while the scarcity of water is blamed on climate change and rising seas, it's not entirely clear how humanity pulled itself from the darkness that was the Twilight Century (the period that bridges the technological past with this post apocalyptic present). There's also no explanation as to how or why China took over Europe or who they're currently fighting.

There is the view that the true science fiction novel uses science to drive the narrative and not as window dressing. Post Apocalyptic fiction often struggles with this because the focus is often on the fight for survival rather than explaining how the world ended or more importantly finding a solution through science and engineering. Famously, Cormac McCarthy doesn't bother to describe what led to the near destruction of humanity in his harrowing novel, *The Road*. As a result McCarthy's book is less science and more survival fiction.

While *Memory of Water* has more science fictional flesh on the bone when compared to *The Road*, I'm sure there will be those who won't class it as an SF novel. Justin Landon, in his positive review of the book for Tor.com, acknowledges this:

"... There's more story to tell in Itaranta's world, both about the how and why. Without these things it becomes less a science fiction than a literary character study with some odd parameters. Could this have been the story of a girl in desert culture, with no hints at our own imagined future? Most assuredly. Whether that detracts from the novel is a question for each reader to answer. For me, Noria's journey was satisfying and poignant. Emmi Itaranta's novel recalls a memory of what's important, not only to survive, but to actually live."

Like Landon, I was more than satisfied with the journey. But more than that, I don't think Itaranta has been skimpy with her world building due to a lack of care or a different set of priorities. Rather, holding back on explanations – how did China takeover Europe? What happened during the Twilight Century? – are a feature of the novel, not a bug.

As the book is written in first person, we only know what Noria knows. Living in a secluded village coupled with a military that's not keen on giving away secrets means that information about the past is hard to find. And it's not like Noria isn't interested. Her father's decision to train her as a tea-master and show Noria the secret of the spring means that she's more aware of the world around her, and with that awareness comes curiosity and an unwillingness to accept the status quo.

