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Set in 1912, difficult questions are asked and answered at a university at Cambridge.

The Gate of Angels Details

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From Reader Review The Gate of Angels for online ebook

Lisa says

Penelope Fitzgerald wrote such rare small gems, and there just are not enough of them, so I spread them out. This time I chose *The Gate of Angels*, a novel set in turn of the century Cambridge. The plot is slender, a simple love story, but it is the comic backdrop of a pre-war Cambridge with its silly clubs, long worn out traditions and eccentric personalities that makes this book something to cherish. Fred Fairly's college is having a remarkably difficult time crossing the bridge from the 19th to the 20th century, no women are admitted on the premises, not even tabby cats, "but the starlings were more difficult to regulate." Throw into this mix a very literal working class girl on a bike...and magic happens. Maybe real magic. No one is real sure why some of the things happen that happen. Angels? Fun book, easy one long sitting or day and half broken up reading. *The Gate of Angels* was a perfect comfort of a story

Jonathan Pool says

For lovers of short books this packs a lot into its two hundred pages. Cambridge University is well represented in literature as a last resort of male only mores and traditions. Fitzgerald writes a pastiche firmly in the mould of Evelyn Waugh and of Tom Sharpe. The customs and peculiar idiosyncrasies of Cambridge are fertile material for good writers. Fred Fairly is a charming, and innocent product of a simpler world as are Prof Flowerdew and Skippey and the whole "Disobligers" (!!!!) society.

Where *The Gate of Angels* springs its surprises, and offsets the whimsical world of St. Angelicus college so beautifully, is via Daisy Saunders.

The deliberate contrasting of Daisy and Fred creates a book that throws in a number of very loosely, and tenuously connected incidents. Supporting characters have cameo roles, and chaotic dilemmas, most of which are left unresolved at the end of the book.

That's what makes Fitzgerald a worthwhile and original reading experience.

•Karen• says

Now who could resist Daisy Saunders? Obviously she looks the part of a true heroine, tall and slender but strong with a wealth of hair - ah, the symbolism of hair - and furthermore she is made of the right stuff: generous, frank and free in her opinions without being shameless or impertinent, pragmatic, witty, and intelligent. Irresistible. Fred cannot withstand her obvious charms for sure. Once Providence has thrown them together, he is smitten, he is felled, he is helplessly bewitched:

"Well, this is the second time we've ever met. We don't hardly know each other and we aren't anything to each other."

Fred was appalled. "Don't you know what you are to me?" he asked.

Daisy considered. "I suppose I do know, Fred. To tell you the truth, a child of six would notice it."

Of course there is a catch, the course of true love and so on... Fred is Junior Fellow of an arcane (view spoiler) Cambridge college which forbids marrying and living out for one thing, and for another Daisy is not of the marriageable class. This is 1912, and the gulf between a girl from South London where Stockwell turns to Brixton, and a Junior Fellow from Blow Holt rectory (change at Bishop's Leaze) is as wide as the ocean and just as unbridgeable. No fear though. We know we are in a topsy-turvy (magical?) world where the willows have blown down and the cows are blundering about or lying on their backs:

A scene of disorder, tree-tops on the earth, legs in the air, in a university city devoted to logic and reason.

Sounds horribly like a historical romance doesn't it? I'm failing miserably to get the flavour here, because it is just the tastiest little morsel, quite, quite scrumptious. There are gentle side swipes at the fusty academics:

In some colleges - King's for example - they talked all evening, but then King's was full of historians and philosophers, who had no need to relax. What else did they ever do?

Daisy is so winning not least because of all the assaults on her dignity and maidenhood she has to withstand; a nubile girl of her class is seen as fair game for every groper and wide boy and slobbering old lecher. She wins our hearts too with the good grace and wicked dry wit with which she counters insults and knocks, and because her biggest mistake is made out of a desire to help a soul in distress. There is the women's question: the campaign for women's suffrage is at its height, and women are done down at every turn. Mrs Wrayburn studied for four years at Newnham, but the university does not award degrees to women. There is a glimpse into the scary world of early 20th century medicine, still using leeches and the fierce unassailable authority of the gods in white, indulged in their every whim and craziness. Another theme is the power of story - a newspaper story that loses Daisy her job, a ghost story that forces the police to re-open a case... And over all of this there is more, there is more: the squeaky question of the unobservable. Can we only trust and believe what we can see? What role is there for the non-rational? There has to be a leap of faith for Ernest Rutherford to come up with the idea of atomic mass. Is this comparable with belief in a god above, or ghosts below? Perhaps a certain amount of mystery is necessary, or at the very least desirable in the world - Fred and Daisy's romance nearly comes to grief over a complete and total exposure of the truth about the accident that brought them together. It is only a magical, inexplicable event that can save them.....
Magical, there's that word again. There is something magical about Fitzgerald packing all of that into 218 pages. Delicious.

Justin Evans says

This could easily have turned into a fairly silly 'positivist-scientist comes to see that there's at least one thing that he can't explain positivistically, viz., love' kind of tale, which I'd be fine with under other circumstances, but I expect more from Fitzgerald. And she delivers more, much more--emotionally compelling, intellectually riveting, and told with her usual cold, charming narrator's voice. But most importantly she avoids the romantic-comedy category by making it very clear that Fred's love for Daisy is nowhere near as important as the many, many other things in life that aren't susceptible to a 'scientific' analysis, such as, say, morality, mystery, and history.

Rose Gowen says

The title gave me pause.

But there were no supernatural chicks, so it was okay. This was my favorite of my Fitzgerald binge. Really good. Funny. Forster-ish.

Here's a quote:

"When the whole of the men's ward had been persuaded to face the morning, the patients washed, wounds dressed, the windows facing the world open an inch and a half, those away from the wind open six inches, all of them two inches less than in the night, when the gas jets were burning, the abdominal cases on their backs, the apopleptics on their face, the fractured skulls on their sides, the broken limbs raised on blocks (or at the end of the ward, where the blocks had run out, on tin bowls), the coughs hushed, the morbid curiosity about the screen cases quelled, the steak-and-kidney pudding smuggled in by No. 23 (to keep up his strength before his operation) quietly removed, and the bed-covers all smooth, all white, all blameless, all blank, all clean, there was a moment of balance and harmony, scarcely real, when nurses and probationers knew themselves as artists."

(Okay, so maybe there are some angels, but Fitzgerald doesn't push this line too hard.)

I always love a catalogue, but it's particularly apt here where one of the characters has just gone into nursing, and even without the bit about artists at the end of the sentence, you know that she is good at her job. She is calm and efficient; she is proud of this body of knowledge she has absorbed; she knows the rules, but also how to improvise (tin bowls); she sees her patients as a group, but also as individuals (No. 23). You can tell she loves her job, and also that she isn't burnt out, disillusioned, or disappointed yet. Genius.

Jan-Maat says

I was going to say that this was a love story, but then I remembered that only one of the protagonists is in love with the other. This is, I find, the more usual state of affairs. Also of course it is a Fitzgerald novel and nothing is as straightforward as it looks, the simple prose is dense with secrets that unfold in the imagination after reading. However this is a short, witty story possibly with a happy ending set in Cambridge and London at the beginning of the 20th century.

Cambridge and London are not to be understood as high falutin'. This is an archaic Cambridge with male only colleges with celibate staff at the birth of modern physics (this features in the story too) and a London, well like it is, dirty and raucous, where pretending to be something other than you are is a fact of life. Contrasted with another equally single minded institution - if one that is slightly less well fed - a London teaching hospital.

A pope poisoned from his favourite quince jelly, flesh eating ghosts, women's suffrage, the atheist inclinations of a Vicar's son, it is all here.

Annette says

Superb book. Intelligent, very funny and poignant. Lovely clean clear writing style, very evocative without any purple prose. Perfect.

Sub_zero says

Ambientada en Cambridge en la segunda década del siglo XX, *La puerta de los ángeles* podría definirse como una suerte de novela de campus en la que diferentes miembros de la comunidad académica debaten largo y tendido sobre temas científicos de lo más elevado. Sin embargo, eso sería mentir. O, como mínimo, no contar toda la verdad. Y es que, en efecto, esta estupenda novela de Penelope Fitzgerald aborda profundas cuestiones filosóficas y espirituales que marcan en cierta medida su desarrollo argumental, pero lo que de verdad hace girar los engranajes de la historia es el extravagante enamoramiento que profesa uno de sus personajes principales, Fred Fairly, por una enigmática mujer a la que conoció tras un accidente de bicicleta. Haciendo gala de un tono que fluctúa incesantemente entre lo riguroso y lo cómico, entre la solemnidad y la astracanada, Fitzgerald nos hace partícipes de una historia en la que ancestrales dicotomías se disputan una reñida prominencia. Fe y ciencia. Azar y destino. Modernidad y tradicionalismo. La crisis religiosa que sufre el protagonista coincide con ese momento histórico en el que las mujeres luchaban por obtener el sufragio y conquistar plazas que solo estaban al alcance del sector masculino, estallando así contra todos los principios lógicos que hasta entonces se consideraban consolidados. Del mismo modo, una batalla parecida entre razón y corazón se librará en el interior de Fred, dando como resultado una novela sugerente, sutil, estimulante y divertida que esconde mucho más de lo que aparenta.

Supriya says

The more you read Fitzgerald the more her habits become apparent: class anxieties, differences between the interplay of intelligence and education - although I've never yet read a character of hers for whom either is mutually exclusive - a stylistic brevity that like Daisy Saunders, this novel's heroine, comes down to the fact that quarrelling is a luxury reserved for those who can afford the time. The construction of the novel as short story, with the big final OH SNAP moment coming in three lines, or even one, and working, not leaving the reader feeling cheated. And in fact leaving the reader ~*~dazzled~*~.

I think PF has been over this theme before, several times before, of how reason and belief do not interact. She flirts with mysticism which I can take or leave but her touch is so delicate that it's more likely to illuminate things her readers didn't consider before than to turn off lights that were always on. Moreover, this is such a great, great evocation of place: if anyone could make all-male early 20th century Cambridge feel so familiar, it would be her.

A word to the socially conscious: do not read this book in public if you care that fellow citizens will wonder at you for smiling and crying simultaneously: not at one or two points, but practically through this book. I'm so done with you Penelope. Don't be so fucking charming.

Greg says

What a lovely, smart story with romantic and ghostly elements to satisfy a multitude of genres/readers. I hereby crown Penelope Fitzgerald with the "Royal Highness of Authors Who Know The Exact Moment to

End a Story" award. I could list dozens of authors who could learn a lot by reading a few of her novels. And to all readers: Fitzgerald is a must!

Paul Fulcher says

"A scene of disorder, tree-tops on the earth, legs in the air, in a university city devoted to logic and reason."

Penelope Fitzgerald was a famously late blooming author, being shortlisted for the Booker in 1978 for *The Booskop* [<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>] published when she was 60, winning it the next year for *Offshore*, and going on to be shortlisted 2 more times, in 1988 (for *The Beginning of Spring*) and finally in 1990 for this novel, which lost out to Byatt's *Possession*. Although she was overlooked for her most critically acclaimed novel, *The Blue Flower* [<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>] (1995).

Having spent much of the last month wading through too many over-long shortlisted titles from this year's Booker, it was pure pleasure to return to Fitzgerald's wonderfully compact prose. In 160 pages she manages to tell a (simple) story, create an evocative sense of historical place, introduce us to some memorably baffling characters and explore a number of powerful themes.

As with *Beginning of Spring*, it is set in the immediate pre WW1 period, which Fitzgerald has described elsewhere as "a time of very great hope of the coming of the 20th century, hopes of a New Life, a new world, the New Woman, a new relationship between the artist and the craftsman." It was also a key period in the development of atomic physics, which forms both a background plot element (e.g. the rivalry between Cambridge's Cavendish lab and Rutherford and Geiger then in Manchester) as well as a key motif.

Indeed the story both starts and ends with a random collision between two "particles" - the main characters Fred Fairly, a Junior Fellow at the fictitious Cambridge college St Angelicus, and Daisy Saunders a poor, student nurse.

Atomic physics is also invoked as a model for religious faith, based as it is on "unobservables". Fitzgerald herself was religious, but Fairly isn't and is also exposed to the views of his employer Professor Flowerdew who sets out a very prescient (for a character in 1913, rather less so for author in 1990) critique of the future of atomic physics. From Ernest Mach (famous in reality for his 1897 statement "I don't believe that atoms exist!"), the fictional Flowerdew learned:

"the folly of basing any kind of scientific research on unobservables...in respect of the atom, Mach said to the world, don't commit yourself to it! An atom is not a reality, it is just a provisional idea.

...

Let me tell you what is going to happen, over the coming centuries, to atomic research.... They'll find that the models won't do, because they would only work if atoms really existed, so they'll replace them by mathematical terms which can be stretched to fit...there will be elementary particles which are too strange to have anything but curious names, and anti-matter which ought to be there but isn't."

Fairly believes, and tells his Vicar father, that he is "a man with a mind cleared and perpetually being recleared (because there was a constant need for that) of any idea that could not be tested through physical experience" and hence free of faith, but his, rather odd relationship, with Daisy challenges the foundations of his non-belief.

Fitzgerald is wonderful at the brief sketch:

On St Angelicus, also known as "Angels" and it's arcane rules:

"When James I said that a man should pray at Kings, eat at Trinity and study at Jesus, he added (on one occasion at least) 'and he should sleep in peace at Angels.

...

As on Mount Athos, no female animals capable of reproduction were allowed on the premises, although the starlings couldn't altogether be regulated. There were no women bedmakers or cleaners of any age."

Cambridge Lecturers who delight in impenetrability (and these still existed in the late 1980s in my experience):

"Could you read what [Professor Wilson] wrote on the blackboard?"

"Usually not. He used to write it with one hand and wipe it off at the same time with the other. But if I had the chance to study his methods..."

Nature:

"The bushes, too, were motionless, but from the crowded stalks and the dense hedges there came a perpetual furtive humming, whining and rustling which suggested an alarming amount of activity out of sight."

Against that, the novel suffers from, to the reader at least, oblique (at least to the reader) developments and characters, although ultimately that is a function of Fitzgerald's brevity and a part of her charm.

The clichéd critical description of Fitzgerald's novels is "polished gems" - and like most clichés, it is perfectly fitting.

Strongly recommended.

Jude says

Within the last year i've developed the nasty habit of doing two things in bed i never had before: eating and watching television. i know. Disgusting to read, debilitating to experience - as these can only be called habits by the kindest or least caring minds and are in fact addictions of the first order. They do only harm and as the compulsion becomes and less manageable, so the satisfactions become more and more illusory.

If i were a dog or some other trainable entity, the idea would be to reward an alternative *good* behavior - preferably one that could be offered on the spot as a distraction from the bad behavior. Some schools would also encourage the use of an irresistible treat as well - to first distract the beast and then make the prospect of doing the good thing more compelling than continuing the bad one. etc.

Which brings us to Penelope Fitzgerald. My friends here at GR actually read on a regular basis. They are forever posting their exploits and my email is full of announcements. Indeed it is full of little else, since my life out of bed is cyclicly as empty, self-indulgent and deplorable as my recent habits in it. At any rate, last evening i picked up *The Gate of Angels* - which i had acquired shortly after reading Fitzgerald's Booker Prize-winning *Offshore* during my vacation in September. It is safe to say that for the duration of my engagement with what is so often referred to as a "slim little volume" that i am not really allowed to use the phrase but because i want to i will, i will be both distracted from and rewarded for my eschewing of both late night eating and television in bed.

This woman's prose and thought - the combination and shape of each - are so delightful that i don't really care what happens. Well of course that is not entirely true, it is simply that i already know i like what she does with a story and with characters and with place and with time and with setting, etc. I know i am guaranteed to have a good time and never feel that amusement is being had at the expense of profundity. I don't know enough about books or writing to say this without apologizing in case i'm foolish for doing so, but the only other writer whose every sentence is so laden with tone and revelation is Austen. Well - all that and humor - only Fitzgerald's is not the irony of distance and delight at hypocrisy, it is a compassionate and affectionate embrace. It is unblinking tenderness.

So we have here - or i do - joys more than equal to the addictions i so carelessly let steal my time and compromise my health. She has written 9 books and this is my second. I may make all the way through til spring.

Hugh says

One of Fitzgerald's best novels - a novel that blends scientific ideas and an affectionate description of Cambridge with ghost stories and the wry humour that pervades all of her writing.

H.A. Leuschel says

This is my first book by this author and won't be the last for sure. There are elements of a love story, wonderful discussions about the philosophical body-mind problem and a host of eccentric and likable characters to engage with. A very enjoyable read!

Robert Lukins says

So concise and rich. Full of fresh air; the reader can breath. One of Penelope's best, and that's saying something.
