

‘Professional Reader’ Ophelia Sings' Reviews > *Walking the Lights* on Goodreads and Amazon

‘Walking the Lights is, unequivocally, the finest debut of the year’



Jul 03, 2016

The mid 90s were a wonderful, confusing, frightening, exciting time to be young. The heady mix of a new Labour government after, quite literally for many, a lifetime of Tory rule; the raw urgency and joy of the soundtrack of our youth, all too soon hijacked by the bland fashmag-approved gloss of Cool Britannia; the embryonic internet and the emerging world of young dotcom millionaires; the poverty and hopelessness of millions, Thatcher's cruel legacy. Deborah Andrews' breathtaking debut beautifully and evocatively captures the truth of youth in mid 90s Glasgow in a tale so deftly woven and beautifully written, it is every bit as addictive as the substances which powder the pages.

Maddie is a jobbing actor fresh from drama college without a penny to her name and a boyfriend who prefers the bottom of a bottle to her company. Struggling to survive between dole payments and all but alienated from her family thanks to a boorish, abusive stepfather, she attempts to anaesthetize herself with an array of drugs; a daily escape from the harsh reality of her life. Eventually breaking free of boyfriend Mike, she embarks on a relationship so fulfilling and life-affirming she allows herself to believe that life may be beautiful after all; her involvement in a retelling of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* becomes her other passionate focus. But a tragic revelation threatens Maddie's already tenuous hold on reality; will her hard-won new life unravel, and will encroaching paranoia and madness claim her?

In Maddie, Andrews has created a damaged heroine so warm, likeable and credible the reader is powerless to resist falling for her. We root for her and cry with her, and feel keenly the losses and fears she feels. She is a beautifully drawn, multifaceted character; the dizzying sense of disorientation and powerlessness as her life slides out of view is palpable and frightening, and we care deeply what becomes of her. The supporting

cast of friends are instantly recognisable to all who were young in 1996, particularly if your group was of the arty persuasion. The delightful Roger is especially memorable, flamboyant yet warm and genuine as he is. The crush of nightclubs and the rush of neverending nights are headily evoked - we are reminded simultaneously of the carefree all-nighters and adventures of youth, and, too, the crushing come-downs and fears for the future. We long for those days, while glad that they are far behind us.

Walking the Lights is a love/hate letter to youth, but also a straight love letter to Scotland - from the grand desolation of remote lochs to the hustle and deprivation of inner-city Glasgow, Andrews paints an affecting and compelling portrait of the country and its people. Her theatrical background ensures that the mechanics of a production - and the lives of those involved - hum with authenticity. Lines from *The Tempest* are judiciously woven into the narrative like sequins, adding to the other-worldly feel and theme. The writing shimmers, poetic and lyrical, hallucinogenic and ethereal. It has been a long time since a book transported me in the way *Walking the Lights* has; the way in which Andrews conjures magic and beauty from grit and suffering is testament to her immense skill.

Walking the Lights is, unequivocally, the finest debut of the year and one of my books of 2016. Deeply moving, hypnotically beautiful, utterly compelling and ultimately redemptive, this is a book whose characters - particularly the complex, damaged, wonderful Maddie - will stay with you long after the last page is turned. Stunning.

My sincere thanks to the publisher and NetGalley for the free ARC in exchange for an honest review.