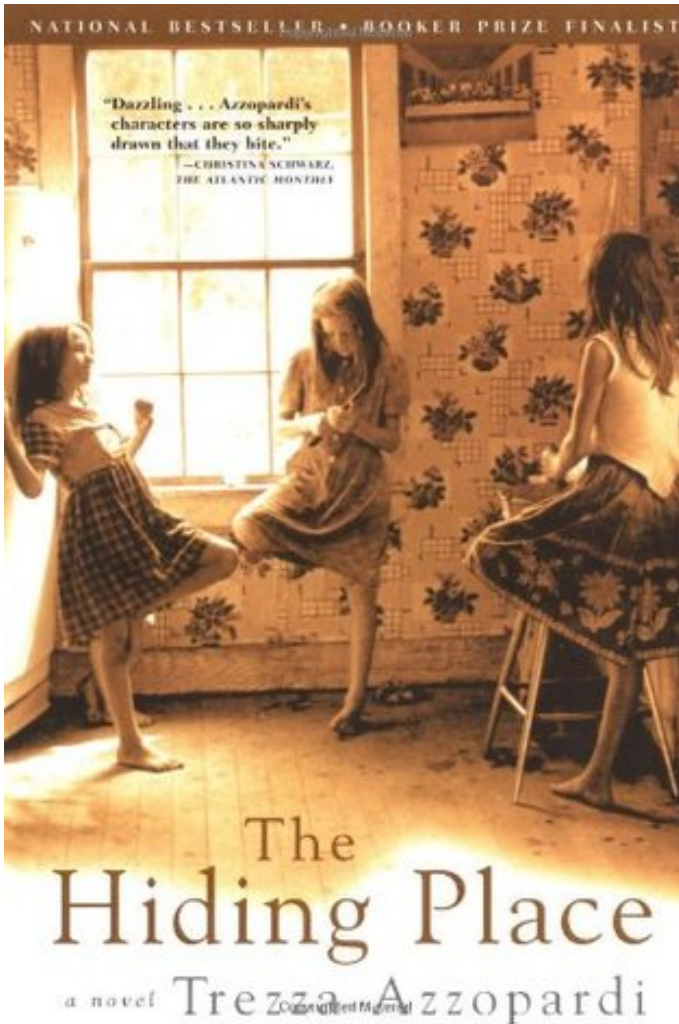

Trezza Azzopardi

The Hiding Place



Title: The Hiding Place

Author: Trezza Azzopardi

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Description

A finalist for the prestigious Man Booker Prize, *The Hiding Place* -- Welsh novelist Trezza Azzopardi's lyrical tale of an immigrant family in Cardiff -- has been compared to Frank McCourt's bleak, stirring memoir *Angela's Ashes*. But *The Hiding Place* need not "hide" behind any ready-made comparisons; Azzopardi's astonishing, tension-filled debut stands assuredly on its own as a work of tremendous power and originality.

The Hiding Place is narrated by Dolores, the youngest of six daughters born to a Maltese immigrant father and a Welsh mother. With one hand permanently disfigured by a fire when she was only one month old -- the hand is beautifully described by the author as "a closed white tulip standing in the rain; a cutoff creamy marble in the shape of a Saint; a church candle with its tears flowing down the bulb of wrist" -- Dolores has always been treated as an outcast. Her father, Frankie Gauci, is an incorrigible gambler who bets "more than he can afford to lose." On the day Dolores is born, he loses his half-share of a cafe, as well as the apartment above it where his family lives. Everything in Frankie's life is potential currency, including his family; he even sells his second-oldest daughter Marina to gangster Joe Medora in exchange for a house and money to pay off his debts. Dolores's mother, Mary, is driven to the edge of insanity as she watches the world around her collapse, helpless to save even her children from her husband's vices.

At times, *The Hiding Place* paints a phantasmagoric portrait of cruelty, but Trezza Azzopardi's gracefully exacting prose saves her tale from becoming a shock-fest of the sort you would expect on daytime television talk shows. Azzopardi forges profundity through delicately interwoven double-sided images: rabbits that are the children's playthings, until they are brutally slaughtered by their father; trunks, rooms, and cages that can either protect or ensnare; and most abundantly and most significantly, fire, which can warm as well as ravage. Even Dolores's older sister Fran is sent away to a home for being a pyromaniac, craving risk like her father, "gambling on how hot, how high, on how long she can bear it."

While some readers may wonder how Dolores is able to relate events that happened when she was so young, it is easy to associate these stories with the phantom pains she feels in her missing fingers, her ability to "miss something [she] never knew." The story comes to us in a dreamlike tapestry, weaving together different times and perspectives. Consequently, the narrative is fragmented, leaving the reader with half-tellings, missing details, stories that unfold only in the retelling, and a sense that the only fact we can be certain of is the profound meaning she imparts through them. *The Hiding Place* is as much a portrait of a family's destruction as it is an exploration of how memory bends and buckles under the weight of ruin, and how "blame can be twisted like a flame in draught; it will burn and burn."

Insightful reviews

Samantha Allen: God this book was sad. I almost lost it reading the final scene on the bus. I'm pretty sure the guy next to me was a bit worried about all the sniffing and eye-dabbing and the way I kept my gaze fixed pointedly out the window.

The structure of this book was sort of weird and is something I think I need to contemplate a bit more. It's all in present tense, which also feels strange, because the story is made up primarily of Dol's memories, which don't seem like memories but more like immediate events that are taking place as they are narrated. But I think that speaks to the trauma that this book centers around. All of the main events of the story are long in the past, but they feel as immediate as ever. The trauma never goes away, no matter how long ago it was or how much physical space you've put between the trauma and yourself.

Gorgeous prose--Dol's burned white hand is like "a closed white tulip"--even if the pace of the novel sometimes lags. It isn't revealed the Dol is back in her old house because her mother died until very late in the book, which I think was a mistake. The disjointed quality of the memories would have been better explained if that information had been right at the front. Overall quite a good read, and I'm looking forward to working with this wrier at UEA next year!

Ron Charles: What an entrance. The first time anybody heard of Trezza Azzopardi, she was nominated for one of the world's most prestigious literary awards. Nestled among books by Kazuo Ishiguro and Margaret Atwood, there sat "The Hiding Place," a first novel by a recent graduate student, up for this year's Booker Prize. English bookstores scrambled to find copies. Readers in the US were locked out while publishers bid on the domestic rights. Gratefully, Atlantic Monthly Press, the most discerning publisher of literary fiction in America, is releasing the book this week.

Wherever Azzopardi has been hiding, it's been worth the wait. Her novel about the misfortunes of the Gauci family in Cardiff, Wales, burns with the blue flame of long smothered agony. And yet her sophisticated handling of the early-trauma memoir, made so spectacularly popular by Frank McCourt & Co., casts fresh light on the process of memory and the subjectivity of experience.

The story is told by Dolores, the youngest of the Gauci's six girls in a poor Maltese immigrant community. A series of delicately rendered scenes shows the family collapsing in a neighborhood that's slowly being demolished in the 1960s. You can smell the close, grimy quarters of Cardiff in these pages. Azzopardi creates a collection of neighbors pushed alternately to compassion or bitterness by unrelenting poverty.

The children, meanwhile, must navigate this turbulence largely on their own. Dolores's hauntingly cool voice - a hybrid perspective of a child's innocence and an adult's irony - describes the family's decay.

Their father, Frank, is a man given more chances than he deserves. He owns half a cafe that could support them, but he can't shake the thirst for easy wealth, and in the process he starves his family, pushing his wife and one of his daughters into prostitution.

The night Dolores is born, Frank is playing cards with a two-bit gangster, "an archetypal villain who makes sure he looks the part." His friends send him a lie about the birth to raise his spirits: "My father, who is Frankie Bambina to his friends, poor unlucky Frank to have so many daughters, twists in reckless joy, and loses the cafe, the shoebox under the floorboards full with big money, his own father's ruby ring, and my mother's white lace gown". At least I have a son, he thinks, as he rolls the ring across the worn green felt."

In the novel's most wrenching moment, 1-month-old Dolores is almost burned to death in their apartment. She survives the flames, but loses her wispy new hair, much of her baby-soft skin, and her left hand.

Regarded first as a disappointment for being a girl, by the time Dolores becomes aware of herself, she's aware of herself as a charred embodiment of the family's bad luck.

One of the many frightening talents of this new author is the way she delineates the scale of a child's pain. Tragedies large and small sear Dolores with equivalent effect. When her pet rabbits are killed, for instance, the damage to her seems almost as severe as the loss of her hand.

Their mother loves these girls and fights to save them from their father's carelessness and the social workers' care, but circumstances seem destined to crush her body and mind. She's never free from the terror of having to support six children while lashed to an abusive husband ready to sell off anything and anyone that might bring in a bit of luck or money.

Dolores winds through these events without blame or sentimentality. She has a clear-eyed view of her parents' agony even through the cloud of their shameless irresponsibility. She wants only to retrieve these memories and place them in order, as though that might relieve her of the burden of wishing she could have saved her parents from themselves.

A short section set in the present day at first seems tacked on to this harrowing story of childhood. But it quickly complicates the novel in fascinating ways. Dolores notes, "As with all truth, there is another version." When the sisters gather for the first time in 30 years for their mother's funeral, the air is thick with those other versions - long-nursed grievances, rock-solid denial, and the unquenched need to reconnect with their fellow survivors.

Dolores begins to realize that common experiences don't make for common perceptions or similar needs. Some of her sisters insist she couldn't have witnessed crucial events she recalls with great precision. The oldest sibling has interred the past and insists that no one disturb it. For Dolores, this long-awaited reunion threatens a final separation from her siblings. And yet, as with so much of the suffering in this book, there is a kind of tenacious love beating beneath the surface.

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2001/0111/p1...>

Christina: It's hard to believe that this astonishingly accomplished lyrical account of loss upon loss -- "Children burnt and children bartered: someone must be to blame" -- is a first novel. Against a drizzly backdrop of Cardiff docklands in the process of demolition, Dolores Gauci, the

sixth girl born to a brutal, ne'er-do-well Maltese father and a neglectful, adulterous Welsh mother, untangles skeins of memory, story, and speculation to try to find the threads that tie together her burnt left hand, her vanished older sister, her runaway father and his murdered friend, her mother's insanity, and, finally -- as the loss of her five fingers foreshadowed -- the scattering of her remaining sisters soon after the oldest's wedding. That her family disintegrated before Dol turned six makes much of what she feels "ghost pain," "miss[ing] what [she] never had," and ultimately she's propelled by her desire to collect the people she has lost -- particularly to reattach to her sisters, who are as "slippery as a set of new cards." She wants to share their histories and secrets, to be at last included in the family.

Trezza Azzopardi's characters are so sharply drawn that they bite, and her details, evoking muddy back yards, stained sheets, rubbish-strewn streets, and scuzzy cafés, are strangely lovely. What makes this novel brilliant, though, is its tone. Despite the misery they express, the sentences, written in quick-paced present tense, lilt and caper. Dol's voice and sensibility match those of the third-person narrator, who slips in and out of this rich and complexly structured novel to reveal events that the little girl could not have seen. Both note the most minute images, such as the scum on the surface of a cup of tea, and Dol is entirely without self-pity, just as the third-person narrator is without pathos. Near the end of the novel Dol's adult awareness of her sorrow and resentment slightly tarnish the brightness of her straightforward tone. Remarkably, here for the first time the dark surroundings feel oppressive.

"Someone must be to blame." But throughout this dazzling novel Dol recognizes that it's difficult to say precisely who. Azzopardi allows Dol to construct an order with herself at the center, but both the novelist and the character understand that "as with all truth, there is another version."

Michelle: it is a heartbreaking novel. For me, it's correct up there with Angela's Ashes. Yes, the characters aren't absolutely explored; no - we do not get to proportion the feeling's of the parents. What we do see is the tale of a damaged relations advised from the point of view of the youngest daughter. i wished to guard this character; to inform her that it might be alright. the unhappy half it that telling her that might be a lie...and she may understand it. a contemporary tragedy.

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Lisa: i began this months in the past and placed it down. My first response used to be that it's darkish - it nearly feels as though it's written in a minor key. The quite often third-person voice and constrained discussion create a moody, lonely context. All of which upload as much as my response that it's very good crafted - extraordinary that it may be so evocative ... yet i do not just like the emotions it inspires so i used to be hesitant to maintain reading. As I persevere notwithstanding i'm understanding the voice of Dol (the basically first-person narrative?) and the fierce love of Mary for her women has pulled me in and that i have to discover the place we're going ... So. Finished. three stars as the writing / the best way the radical is crafted is exquisite. yet I virtually want I by no means picked it up. Frankie is irredeemable (why create a personality with whom sympathy is impossible?) Rose and Lucca now not a lot better. the ultimate dozen pages have been simply so so sad.

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