



The Sleeping Beauty

Elizabeth Taylor

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A subtle love story by one of the most accomplished writers of the 20th century

Vinny Tumulty is a quiet, sensible man. When he goes to stay at a seaside town, his task is to comfort a bereaved friend. Vinny is prepared for a solemn few days of tears and consolation. But on the evening of his arrival, he looks out of the window at the sunset and catches sight of a mysterious, romantic figure: a beautiful woman walking by the seashore. Before the week is over Vinny has fallen in love, completely and utterly, for the first time in his middle-aged life. Emily, though, is a sleeping beauty, her secluded life hiding bitter secrets from the past.

The Sleeping Beauty Details

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From Reader Review The Sleeping Beauty for online ebook

Chrystal says

My third Elizabeth Taylor and the best so far. The story appears to be about Emily, the Sleeping Beauty of the title, but in reality is about Vinny, who awakens her, and Isabella, who knows Vinny's dark secret, and about Laurence, Isabella's son. We learn about all these characters in turn, the author very artfully jumping back and forth between their perspectives. I loved how she told the reader all the characters' secrets, and allowed us to watch on as they found them out, causing a story that could have been sad and depressing to end up being very funny.

The scene with the nurse and the three children was hilarious, as was the scene where Laurence finds his mother and her friend with mud masks and the racing papers strewn all over the floor. There were many scenes like this where we knew what each person was trying to hide, and you just had to squirm in your seat, waiting for them to find out.

"People who are wakened from a long sleep are exposed to many dangers. The prince in the fairy-tale knew that, when he wakened the Sleeping Beauty: and he married her the very same day. The difficulties began--they did not end--with his kiss."

Michael says

This is the third Elizabeth Taylor novel I've read in the past year and this reader becomes more impressed with each one. Each of the characters here are portrayed brilliantly. In general, sympathetic at first but, as in real life, flaws slowly make their way to the surface. This grants them a depth and authenticity that will touch the reader. That said, it is the skillful use of their inner thoughts and engaging conversations, all laced with biting wit and keen observations of the human experience with all its myriad complexities, presented in such beautifully crafted prose, that make novels such as this one such a joy to read. Looking forward to reading more of Ms. Taylor's work.

Paul says

Another cleverly wrought novel by Taylor. It is loosely based on the fairy tale, but with rather a flawed prince. It is mainly set in the seaside town of Seething (really?). Isabella's husband has recently died in a boating accident and an old friend comes to stay to provide support. Vinny Tumulty is that friend. Taylor sets up Vinny's Character early on:

"Nearing fifty, Vinny felt more than ever the sweet disappointments only a romantic knows, whose very desires invite frustration; ... Past and future to him were the realities; the present dull, meaningless, only significant if, as now, going back along the sands, he could say to himself: 'Later on, I shall remember.' To link his favourite tenses in such a phrase was to him the exhalation of romance, and the fact that such phrases

had preceded all his disappointments, heralded all the counterfeit and treachery he had worked or suffered, could not detract from its magic. He disdained to learn from so drab a teacher as Experience”

The reader also knows from early on that Vinny is married, something he does not tell others. He has never lived with her and rarely sees her, but nevertheless the marriage remains and no one else (apart from the reader) knows.

Whilst supporting Isabella, Vinny meets Emily. She lives with her sister Rose who runs a boarding house. Emily has had a sheltered life and is the sleeping beauty of the title. She looks after Rose’s daughter, who has developmental difficulties. Emily has had a car accident in the past, which has affected her. Vinny falls in love with Emily.

There is a good set of minor characters. Isabella’s son Laurence has just left school and has joined the army. He has a tense relationship with his mother and has just started dating. Vinny’s mother, Mrs Tumulty is a strong character and Taylor knows how to write an entrance for a character:

“Vinny and the gardener brought in the most curious weather-beaten luggage – an old leather hat-box; a round-topped trunk with labels of countries which no longer existed, hotels which had been shelled in 1916 and never risen again; a Gladstone-bag; a wicker hamper. There were also Mrs Tumulty’s bird-watching glasses and a black japanned box in which she collected fungi; for she was a great naturalist.”

This isn’t my favourite Taylor novel, but as always it is well written and easy to read. I’m not sure that the fairy tale element works as there is a rather middle aged prince with a secret wife and a rather soporific princess. There are a number of comic moments, often involving Isabella and her friend Evalie, look out for the scene with the face packs and their surreptitious betting on horses. The Tillotson family and their unruly children also provide comic relief at the boarding house.

This is an attempt by Taylor to write a romance, not a conventional one as the reader is aware of Vinny’s secret. Taylor also leaves the reader to make (or not make) moral judgements at the end.

Patricia says

There were lovely pieces, some poetic natural description and funny but sympathetic bits on Evalie and Isabelle questing after beauty and comfort. Still, I kind of trudged on to the end.

Roger Pettit says

Given that Barbara Pym is my favourite novelist, it's perhaps not surprising that I enjoy the writing of Elizabeth Taylor. They are very similar authors. Both deal with the anxieties, the insecurities, the loneliness and the poignancy that form a large part of all our inner lives. Their particular canvas is the parochial minutiae of a certain type of middle-class existence and the melancholy and sadness that all too often come with such a life. But, despite the fact that many of their principal characters are well-heeled people of independent means, their themes are universal. Both were writing at a time - the 1950s and 1960s - when, in the UK at least, kitchen sink drama was making considerable inroads into the cultural landscape. The lives and preoccupations of working-class people were considered (quite rightly, perhaps) to be in need of greater literary prominence. As a result, the writing of both Pym and Taylor seems to have suffered from periods of neglect. Thankfully, their output has been back in fashion for some time now and most of their books are currently in print.

'The Sleeping Beauty' is not one of Taylor's best novels. But it is nonetheless a good read. It concerns the

mid-life crisis being experienced by 50-year old Vinny Tumulty. When visiting a recently-widowed friend, Isabella, in a small seaside town, Vinny comes across a young, attractive woman, Emily (the 'sleeping beauty' of the title). He is immediately smitten with her. In fact, Vinny becomes so infatuated with Emily that he wants to marry her. The problem is that Vinny already has a wife, Rita. Although they have not lived together for years, they have never divorced. To make matters worse, Vinny has carefully concealed Rita's existence and their marriage from his family and friends, including his domineering mother. 'The Sleeping Beauty' is therefore a story about the vicissitudes of love.

The novel is written in Elizabeth Taylor's customary style. The prose is pristine; and the dialogue is convincing. There is little or no linear plot. What we get instead is a series of finely wrought vignettes that describe the impact on those around them of this seemingly ill-matched couple's somewhat shaky union. What makes 'The Sleeping Beauty' slightly less enjoyable than the two other Taylor novels that I have read is that none of the principal characters is remotely likeable. Vinny himself is pompous and self-satisfied; his mother is unbearable; and I did not warm to Isabella or to her son Laurence (or to any of the other main protagonists, including Emily herself and her sister Rose). However, the story is replete with Taylor's quiet and intelligent insight into the human condition. Even though it's not her best work, I enjoyed it. 'The Sleeping Beauty' is well worth a few hours of your time. 7/10.

Behemoth says

All the minor characters sing, especially the hilarious gambling ladies and the young soldier, but this is my least favorite Taylor because the main character, the sleeping beauty, herself, never quite came alive. For one thing, I didn't really understand her injury. It seemed like the kind of injury that only people in books suffer.

Everything about getting divorced in the nineteen-fifties was fascinating.

Mela says

The first thing I did after I finished this phenomenal book I searched for Taylor's other books. I think it says all.

It is a beautifully written book, a brilliant novel.

I was (I am still) enchanted with a love story. So poetic and tender.

'My plans for today are to hang about hoping for a glimpse of her, to have my heart eaten away by the thought of her; to feel my blood bounding maddeningly, ridiculously, like a young boy's; to despair; to realise the weight of my misery and hunger with each step I take.'

'I cannot think why you love me,' he said, as all lovers say; but with more anxiety in his voice than is usual. 'Oh, I am nothing without you,' she said. 'I should not know what to be. I feel as if you had invented me. I watch you inventing me, week after week'

I should have said love stories, because you'll find here two different love stories.

Secondly, there are fascinating characters. They are described with care, precision and charm. Elizabeth Taylor was a great writer and a psychologist. She created so real characters.

Past and future to him were the realities; the present dull, meaningless, only significant if, as now, going back along the sands, he could say to himself: 'Later on, I shall remember.'

She felt locked away in herself, but ignorant of her identity, and often she awoke suddenly in the night, without any idea of who she was; thinking, firstly, that she had died.

She looked ready to be wounded for everybody,

'People are different in different places,' he thought hazily. 'And if they're all right in one place, it's best to leave them there.'

(view spoiler)

Elizabeth Taylor had so much to tell and she did it creating enjoyable (and sometimes amusing) story. And she asked difficult questions.

They met middle-age together-a time when women are necessary to one another-and all the petty but grievous insults of greying hair, crowsfeet, and the loathed encumbrances of unwanted flesh, seemed less sordid when faced and fought (though fought spasmodically and with weak wills) gaily together.

The most bitter thing for a child is to see in another just the kind of son his mother deserved,

If you love books which have something to tell,
if you love a sweet love story,
read this book.

Steven Pilling says

Really enjoyed this novel.

Didn't think I would and only read it because of a recommendation from a friend.

I am not sure that I can name any novelist Taylor resembles although I can see why Jane Austen is mentioned. I also feel that Wharton is a good comparison point as Taylor essentially binds her characters via a web of rules of engagement and expectations.

Taylor's strength is description, there are passages which you want to read aloud because Taylor is laser sharp and forensic in her use of words, if it wasn't so serious you could describe the novel as almost joyous, it makes you want to hold the book and not let it go.

Some of the characters are astonishing and my view of Vinny may not chime with other peoples, it is romantic but it is also harsh, love is complex and defined by each character and it's the meeting and conflict between characters and their position on love, honour and expectation that gives the novel its real heart.

I am still considering my views on Vinny and currently i am not impressed with his actions and feel that he is a coward and a man who decides his fate not based on love but on need but i think other people will disagree and this has to be the real strength of the novel.

I cannot recommend this novel highly enough.

Jane says

In this, her sixth novel, Elizabeth Taylor took the bones of a fairy story and re-set it as a very human story, among other human stories, in an English seaside town.

Vinny, the hero, is visiting to offer help and support to an old friend, Isabella, who has been widowed. He does the job beautifully and Isabella, anxious about growing old on her own, fancies that she is beginning to fall in love with him.

Her son, Lawrence, on leave from the army, is less impressed.

And Vinny is falling in love with another. With a young woman he saw walking, alone, across the beach.

Emily lived at the town's guest house with her widowed sister, Rose, and Rose's disabled daughter. She'd had an independent life, but there had been a car accident. The physical injuries had healed but the mental scars had not. Maybe Vinny, in love for the first time, in his fifties, could be the man to rescue her ...

Meanwhile, Isabella and her friend Evalie invest in beauty treatments, trying to hold on to youth and hope. Laurence, to his mother's displeasure, embarks on a romance with Betty a nursery maid staying with her employers at Rose's guest house. And Ruth frets about how she would manage, should her sister marry.

The relationship between Vinny and Emily advances nicely. But Vinny has a secret that he dare not tell.

Elizabeth Taylor, of course, paints all of those characters, all of those lives, quite beautifully. Always showing, but never telling. I saw insecurities, I saw snobbery. But I understood; these were real, fallible human beings. In a few places I had doubts, but in the end there was nothing that I couldn't accept.

Those doubts lead me to say that this is not my favourite of Elizabeth Taylor's novels. I'd like to explain more, but to do that properly I would have to give away more of the plot than feels right.

My other concern was the balance between the characters: one more household, one more plotline, would have made the community and this seaside town so much more real for me. But I think that maybe what I wanted wasn't what the author intended.

Whatever the case, I have to say that this is still a lovely book: beautifully written and with much to say about the human condition.

Helen Stanton says

Already well wrapped up in thisthe writing is brilliant.....

This is a fantastic book and I would give it 6 stars if I could. So glad I have discovered this overlooked writer. A very subtle tale, she has an incredible ear for dialoguesome real LOL moments !!!!!

Hilary says

A funny and clever look at relationships and weaknesses. Some interesting and realistic characters, written with a dry sense of humour. A witty observation about cauliflower cheese at the start of the book !

Canadian Reader says

“Love is a disturbing element . . . disruptive, far-reaching. The world cannot assimilate it or eject it. Its beauty can evoke evil; its radiance corrupts . . . “

Years before the story proper begins, Isabella, a central character in Taylor’s sixth novel, meets Vinny Tumulty (yes, Tumulty) at a London blood donor clinic. They recline on beds positioned next to each other, and, as their blood is collected, Isabella notices how soothing Vinny’s presence can be. Afterwards, Vinny drives her home, and he meets her husband, Harry. Thus begins his insinuation into the Godden family. Since that time, he has kept in touch with an annual Christmas card.

When the novel opens, Vinny has not seen Isabella for a decade. Now close to 50, he gallantly re-enters her life to comfort her in her time of loss, for Harry, a public figure and Liberal MP, has recently died. He drowned in a yachting accident, which his 20-ish son, Laurence, somehow managed to survive. There is some confusion as to what actually happened. Did Laurence attempt to save Harry, or did he leave him to struggle in the water? Whatever the case, Harry’s body was not recovered, and there has been no funeral—not that Isabella would have been capable of arranging one anyway. Harry always looked after everything, from pouring the drinks to doing all the worrying. Almost every character comments on how silly Isabella is, and she herself says that she never grew up.

Taylor has moved the small Norfolk village of “Seething”—a name that promises melodrama—to the coast in order to provide her characters with a romantic, natural backdrop against which to interact. There will be brief scenes set in Buckinghamshire and London, but it is the shoreline with its rocky cliffs and sandy beaches that will be the novel’s primary setting.

When Vinny first arrives in Isabella’s parlour, the reader wonders if he’s there to take advantage of a grieving widow and her financial assets. As Isabella sheds the first of her theatrical tears on his shoulder, Vinny’s eyes are already surveying the room. Any notion the reader may have had that Vinny is interested in Isabella as a person is quickly dispelled. Nevertheless, he remains deeply (and egotistically) invested in his relationships with females, and Isabella’s situation offers him a welcome-enough opportunity to display what he wants everyone to see as his sensitive and sympathetic nature. When it comes to consoling the grieved,

Isabella finds him more personal than the professionals (doctors and clergy). He is certainly smoother. Laurence, Isabella's son, is suspicious of him from the get-go; he finds him a total phoney, and refuses to submit to his counselling and artificial chumminess.

Soon enough, Taylor makes clear that Vinny's dominant characteristic is not sensitivity but romanticism. He can't bear too much reality, the mess of human passions and needs—both physical and emotional. He prefers his encounters with women to occur in the twilight hours, or under cover of darkness, so he doesn't have to see too much or too clearly. He leads everyone to believe he never has and never will marry. Continuing to live with his overbearing, preternaturally vigorous mother in London, he works as an underwriter for Lloyds. When he tells Isabella he'll regularly visit Seething to assist her as she adjusts to a new life without Harry, however, she is delighted by the idea that Vinny is romantically interested in her. Some of the book focuses on her coming to terms with the fact that he has become infatuated with someone else. His rejection of her certainly contributes to the novel's climax.

During his first visit to Seething, Vinny observes a beautiful hooded woman walking on the beach, trailed by a young girl. (Minus the young girl, the scene could be straight out of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*; all the ingredients for male romantic fantasy are there.) Vinny is, of course, immediately smitten with Emily, a "Sleeping Beauty" whose life (he later learns) "froze" after a serious car accident that killed her brother-in-law. As well as causing physical injury, the accident dramatically changed Emily's appearance, making her unrecognizable to those who once knew her. It didn't erase her beauty exactly, but it, or subsequent surgery, somehow rearranged her facial features. (All of this is very hard to buy given the state of plastic surgery in the early 1950s when Taylor wrote the book.) The accident also changed Emily's life in other ways. Once she had been a social butterfly who regularly attended parties, and she had been a much desired woman. After the accident, however, she spent a long time in hospital and was abandoned by her fiancé. For many years now, she has lived a semi-reclusive life as a captive of her chilly sister, Rose Kelsey. Sheltered from a world that Rose regards as dangerous, Emily serves as a companion to and minder of her sister's "loopy", "not-all-there" daughter, Philippa, whose virulence, wild tantrums, and fits of sobbing Rose finds appalling.

Rose has believed herself comfortable, even happy, with the quiet life she has built running a guesthouse, but her security is fragile and ripe for disruption by Vinny Tumulty. Vinny finagles his way into getting a room at the ugly Victorian guesthouse perched on the cliff, so that he can be close to the first woman to genuinely arouse his passion. Having had an erotic dream about her, he is convinced that his personal *Wuthering Heights* has been set in motion, and he is soon scheming to marry Emily. However, he (like almost every other character in the novel) has secrets, and these threaten to stand in his way.

The Sleeping Beauty is the seventh of Taylor's books I've read, and it is definitely the most plot driven of the bunch. It adheres to a more conventional narrative structure, in which a protagonist faces and must overcome obstacles that prevent him from getting what he wants. As in Taylor's other novels, her characters are interesting, but never lovable and certainly not *nice*. Taylor's consistently ironic tone and her subversion of the love stories found in the works of the Brontes, Jane Austen, and, in this case, the classic fairy tale insure that the reader is kept at a certain distance from the characters. There is always a barrier to complete immersion in their stories. Taylor's people dissemble and attempt to hide unpleasant thoughts, traits, and actions from others and themselves. Ultimately, though, the essential nastiness will out—with either a small explosion or a slow, corrosive leak.

Elizabeth (Alaska) says

I'm not especially familiar with a lot of well-known fairy tales and knew of this title only that a prince awakens a sleeping beauty - one who had been asleep for years - with a kiss. Fortunately that was enough information to get the gist of what lay behind Taylor's novel. While she never pricks my emotions, there is always a lot more going on in Taylor's novels than meets the eye, and that is true here. There are other minor plot lines which are perhaps more interesting. I am not one to reread, as I've said many times, but I'm sure these novels are ones I would get something more, or something different, with a rereading.

Taylor is sometimes amusing, usually inserting something with a typically dry English wit. In this there is an entire scene that is funny without any of the characters actually saying what any of them is obviously thinking. It would make a wonderful scene in a movie featuring two middle-aged women. How do you pretend to not see what is plainly before your eyes?

I think no one would suggest this is one of Taylor's better novels. When I finished, I thought "this is just 3-stars." And then I thought more of it. I am glad there are others reading it just now because I also think there is much to discuss.

Sarah Bodney says

Did you ever see that wonderful movie "Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont"? Well, I did and so did my dear friend Sue who discovered that it was written by Elizabeth Taylor. And so a new author opened up for us. From the goodreads listing, it looks like Ms Taylor wrote over 25 books before she died in the 1970s. I am so looking forward to making my way through them.

Mary says

Vinny is a quiet, sensible man.

While staying at an English resort he looks out and catches sight of a mysterious beautiful woman walking along the sea shore.

For the first time in his life he falls in love.

This is a story of bitter secrets from the past and a secluded life.

Can Vinny change all this?

I loved it, one of her best!
