



Cassandra Darke

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Cassandra Darke is an art dealer, mean, selfish, solitary by nature, living in Chelsea in a house worth £7 million.

She has become a social pariah, but doesn't much care. Between one Christmas and the next, she has sullied the reputation of a West End gallery and has acquired a conviction for fraud, a suspended sentence and a bank balance drained by lawsuits. On the scale of villainy, fraud seems to Cassandra a rather paltry offence – her own crime involving 'no violence, no weapon, no dead body'.

But in Cassandra's basement, her young ex-lodger, Nicki, has left a surprise, something which implies at least violence and probably a body... Something which forces Cassandra out of her rich enclave and onto the streets. Not those local streets paved with gold and lit with festive glitter, but grimmer, darker places, where she must make the choice between self-sacrifice and running for her life.

Cassandra Darke Details

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From Reader Review Cassandra Darke for online ebook

Sarah says

3.5 rounded down (4 stars for the artwork, 3 for the story)

A modern take on *A Christmas Carol*, where the antihero is Cassandra, a curmudgeonly ageing art dealer who takes a young, struggling artist (Nicki) into her expensive London home providing she works as Cassandra's assistant. Nicki gets involved with a guy with a troubled past, and we follow the story as the threads link up to a murder.

Let down by an anti-climax of an ending, this is an otherwise enjoyable read, which I think would make for a good introduction if you had never read a graphic novel before.

Blair says

Cassandra Darke is set over a couple of Christmases and tells the story of the title character, a millionaire art dealer who's found to have been defrauding clients and leaves her profession in disgrace. Subsequently, she agrees to take in her stepsister's daughter, Nicky, as a lodger-cum-assistant. Nicky provokes the ire of a dodgy guy in a club (but not before giving him Cassandra's name and phone number), then gets involved in a problematic relationship; the lives of the two women become awkwardly, and dangerously, entangled.

Some reviews describe *Cassandra Darke* as a reworking of *A Christmas Carol*, but that's only really true in that Cassandra is a Scrooge-like figure, rich yet miserly, who is to some extent 'redeemed' – and presumably her initials are a nod to Dickens. Aside from that, there are few parallels, unless the misdirected dick pic is meant to be a stand-in for one of the ghosts. As ever, Simmonds is brilliant at illustrating nuances of human interaction and emotion via the small details of body language, facial expressions and exclamations. This is a read-it-in-one sitting book, yet it's far from simplistic. I loved Cassandra (I found her much more sympathetic than I think I was supposed to!) and it was delightful to lose myself in the snow-dusted London of Simmonds' imagination for a while.

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Hannah Swanwick says

This has nothing to do with the book but I'd convinced myself it was Drake and not Darke until halfway through and then felt like an arse when I realised.

Rebecca says

(3.5) Simmonds would be a great place for graphic novel newbies to start: she writes proper, full-length stories, often loosely based on a classic plot (*Gemma Boverly* on *Madame Bovary*, *Tamara Drewe* on *Far*

from the *Madding Crowd*, this one on *A Christmas Carol*), with lots of narration and dialogue alongside the pictures. Set between December 2016 and December 2017, *Cassandra Darke* is the story of a 71-year-old art dealer who's laid low by fraud allegations and then blindsided by a case of mistaken identity that brings her into contact with a couple of criminal rings. She'd let her stepsister's daughter, Nicki, a penurious performance artist, live in her basement in exchange for being her personal assistant, but Nicki fell in with a dodgy boyfriend and then everything got complicated.

To start with, Cassandra is a Scrooge-like curmudgeon who doesn't understand the big fuss about Christmas – “If everything's such a nightmare, why do it? Why waste your money? Why martyr yourself?” – but she gradually grows more compassionate, especially after her own brief brush with poverty. Luckily, Simmonds doesn't overdo the *Christmas Carol* comparisons. (I looked around for a Christmas past/present/future structure but couldn't find one.) Much of the book is in appropriately somber colors, with occasional brightness: Cassandra's blue scarf, Nicki's dyed pink hair, or the many pops of yellow (including the endpapers and built-in bookmark).

David Harris says

This book was a Christmas present (thank you!)

In *Cassandra Darke*, Simmonds uses the graphic novel format to create something resembling a scrapbook, juggling both panels and chunks of narrative (which sometimes contain, or flow round, single drawings or panes addressing points in the text, or linking with pictures elsewhere in the book). It's told from different perspectives, with the main protagonists (Darke and her niece Nicki) unaware till the end of some parts of each others' story. This reinforces their different points of view, oddly building sympathy for these very different women (who don't actually like each other very much).

Darke is a London gallery owner, something of a monster - snobbish, offensive, aggressive to everyone and, as soon emerges, not above breaking the law. She's also magnificent - unapologetic about how she lives her (fairly unconventional) life, she refuses to be defined by others' expectations of, and assumptions about, her.

What she isn't, though, also matters a lot - Cassandra doesn't really 'do' people and has no patience, especially, with the young. So her stepdaughter Nicki coming to stay always seemed likely to end badly.

And it does.

As the story opens - with Darke's, er, dark secret, discovered - that period is coming to an inevitable end so we get Cassandra's conclusions about it first, but Simmonds then hops back to show what had been going on, including things Cassandra doesn't yet know, before returning to the consequences in the present. In between, she cooks up a complex, fast moving tale encompassing, among other things homelessness, male violence towards women, criminal gangs and the 'empty quarter' of London where luxury flats lie empty in the ownership of foreign oligarchs. Through it all, Simmonds' evocative pictures transport one to all these different Londons - whether to Cassandra's sleek, modern-styled house, to pubs and bars where chancers rub shoulders with upright citizens and outright villains or to the even grubbier areas (where Cassandra really meets trouble).

It is a powerful book, clearly inspired partly by *A Christmas Carol* (the misanthropic central character forced to accept that they are, indeed, part of humanity, the sense of redemption, some echoes and parallels in the

way the story evolves) but much more than that, engaging with the realities of (especially) modern London and picking its way through social norms and conventions (watch how Billy's accent changes). The detail of the illustrations gives plenty of scope to read and reread, always with more to be found (another parallel with Dickens!)

I'd thoroughly recommend this book.

(CWs for some violence towards women and a scene with a dog).

Sean Donnelly says

I suspect how much you enjoy this beautiful graphic novel will depend on how you feel about reading characters who wilfully avoid the demand that they are 'likeable'. Simmonds has spoken specifically about her frustration with the expectation that female protagonists must charm the reader, and *Cassandra Darke* is something of a fuck you to the concept. Cassandra is a snobby, suicidal art dealer, while her niece Nicki is a naive young artist content to sponge from her elder relatives. I loved Cassandra in all her grumpy glory. There's something invigorating about a character, and especially an older woman, who moves through the world refusing to shrink or soften herself, and some of the most memorable images in the book depict Cassandra shouting down rude pedestrians and refusing to feel embarrassed about how much space she takes up on the tube. With her white bob, moleish face and hulking overcoat, she's one of the most visually striking characters in a graphic novel in recent memory, and she's already one of my favourite literary arseholes.

Nicki is a less interesting character, although perhaps the best sequence in the novel concerns a dreadful hen night where she is spiked by a sharp-faced bar crawler and narrowly avoids being raped. This plotline leads us to the frankly feeble main narrative thread, in which Nicki finds herself in the midst of a fool's gallery of London's petty criminals. Although the novel begins, tantalisingly, with a dead body, anyone expecting intrigue or murder mystery will be disappointed. Although the novel is supposedly a riff on a *A Christmas Carol* with Cassandra as Scrooge, this has little relevance to the plot, which barely exists. This is very much a character piece, and an excuse to gorge on Simmond's visuals. She has a wonderful eye for facial expressions, and I particularly like the way she colour washes her pages to produce a sense of place. Her work doesn't feel like any other graphic novels I've read before. There's far more text, and her sequences are more detail-orientated than kinetic, giving them a more meditative feel. Read it for the art and for Cassandra's curmudgeonly charms.

Lady Shockley says

A modern retelling of A Christmas Carol, in which Scrooge is a crabby, bossy old spinster who's been convicted of fraud. Simmond's art is just terrific.

Raisu says

I love her art so much. I love her English so much. I love her spin on the graphic novel form so much.

Joanna Flis says

I don't think that graphic novels are my favourite but I love this story! Horrible old lady (Scrooge in skirt?), naughty niece, crime and London. Joy!

Michael says

This was my first Posy Simmond's graphic novel, and one I'd recommend as a gateway drug into the world of graphic novels, for those coming from a more traditional classical/modern fiction addiction.

As other reviews have noted, Posy Simmond's nods her head to classical works, by lifting themes/elements into her writing. In this book, parallels to "A Christmas Carol" are present, but not overtly intrusive.

The novel itself centres on a down-an-out elderly curmudgeon, at life's end, in her Middle-class London wealth, and briefly exposes her to the seedy underbelly of London's darker side. In doing so, Posy Simmonds demonstrates how small, seemingly insignificant moments, choices and events can so greatly turn life around, or pull you down into these less pleasant aspects of existence (as well as showing us how far removed but also how close, we are to this other side of life).

So, while the Christmas season is upon us, go out and buy your next Festive-themed read.

Ashleigh says

Each new year I write myself a list of achievable goals which make my year more fun. One of my goals this year is to read more graphic novels. I came across a post about the best graphic novels of 2018 and this one stood out for me so I grabbed a copy in waterstones in the sale. I'm so glad I took a chance on this. It's a lovely book with beautiful illustrations and quite a melancholic story. A story about an old miser who gets caught up in a crime she had nothing to do with. You find yourself getting angry towards cassandra, she's not one to help people, she doesn't use her wealth to better anybody else's situation and she's very stuck in her ways and selfish. Somehow you still sympathise with her and end up liking her anyway. I can't wait to find some more lovely graphic novels this year.

Axel says

Whilst I certainly didn't have a bad experience reading this book - it was well executed and I didn't dislike it - I can't say that much positive about it either. After I finished it, I headed over to read some reviews, and found myself reading *The Guardian's* review in a state of cognitive dissonance.

Apparently the rather unlikeable main character was a charming antihero and the bleak story was wonderful satire on *A christmas carol* by Charles Dickens, which I haven't read. Fair enough, I thought. I guess it would be a warm portrait of those unlikeable rich relatives in London that you would if you were in the target

audience of this book.

But what really confused me about the review was how what seemed to me to be the main story* was described as unnecessary backstory which had been shoehorned in and somehow distracts from the main character's meandering misanthropic musings. But again, maybe the target audience is less unsettled by rape drugs and snuff films than I am.

If I was familiar with *A christmas carol*, a connoisseur of graphic novel drawings, and had those unlikeable relatives in London, maybe I could truly appreciate this. Meanwhile, I am none of these things, and to me, this is just another bleak and short story void of likeable characters.

* (view spoiler)

Jane says

Not my favorite Posy Simmonds novel (that would be *Gemma Boverly*) but I will always give a Simmonds work five stars because I want to go back and read them again and again. I buy them the moment I hear about them, and NEVER lend them out to anyone. This hardback edition (very reasonably priced, I thought) is a collector's item with thick gloss paper and a ribbon marker.

The story is mostly in the first-person POV of Cassandra, with an occasional shift into third person when we get the background from her niece Nicky. That jars a tiny bit when you first encounter it, but the glory of graphic novels is that the author can play with many different ways to present the material and I was soon immersed in Nicky's world with its pressures to perform and its social awareness warring with nights of drunken hedonism. I absolutely recognized that world from the Facebook feeds of the 20somethings I've known since they were children.

The London Simmonds portrays is almost Dickensian with its stark contrasts between extreme wealth and grim poverty, and I liked the way the young lovers are able to move between those worlds while Cassandra and her generation are almost entirely cocooned in middle-class luxury. It's a presentation that displays a certain sympathy with the values of the Baby Boomer generation while making it very clear where they (we) went wrong.

Cassandra is the ultimate unsympathetic main character that you can't help liking. Or at least I did--I admired her for being a career woman from a generation where women were expected to like the idea of marriage and children. I loved her honesty about her utter indifference to marriage and children, which contrasted nicely with her blindness about the venality of the world in which she has made her money. She's a rich and nuanced character, selfish but oddly attractive, and I felt that I literally recognized her--but enough said about that. Great characters are always an amalgam of several observations.

I kind of wished the plot hadn't involved a fall from grace on Cassandra's part. I've have liked to have seen her brought low from a position of strength, but I imagine she'd never have given house room to Nicky if there hadn't been a practical reason for it.

There was something very poignant about the photos of Cassandra's younger days. I felt that Cassandra and her world were what Simmonds understood, while the world of the younger characters is a feat of observation from the outside. I rather hope Simmonds has at least one more book in her and that it will deal

with growing old in this day and age, the bizarre nightmare of a dementia-ridden last stage amid the gathered luxury of the world's most (financially) fortunate generation. I truly hope this clever, clear-sighted work of art isn't the last we see of Posy Simmonds, our Jane Austen of graphic novels.

Wendy Greenberg says

I have loved Posy Simmonds since she first lured me into The Guardian back in the day. Times/issues have moved on and so has Simmonds albeit with the same fabulous snarky look at middle class life. The fabulous drawings are, as ever, beautifully observed, telling Cassandra Darke's tale with the backdrop of homelessness, people trafficking and the art world. What a fabulous start to the reading year.

Andrew McClarnon says

Quite a deep read, firstly there's the artwork, loving in its character and detail, funny in its observation, but dramatic in its story telling. Then there is the story itself....
