



## Palimpsest

*Catherynne M. Valente*

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**In the Cities of Coin and Spice** and **In the Night Garden** introduced readers to the unique and intoxicating imagination of Catherynne M. Valente. Now she weaves a lyrically erotic spell of a place where the grotesque and the beautiful reside and the passport to our most secret fantasies begins with a stranger's kiss....

Between life and death, dreaming and waking, at the train stop beyond the end of the world is the city of Palimpsest. To get there is a miracle, a mystery, a gift, and a curse—a voyage permitted only to those who've always believed there's another world than the one that meets the eye. Those fated to make the passage are marked forever by a map of that wondrous city tattooed on their flesh after a single orgasmic night. To this kingdom of ghost trains, lion-priests, living kanji, and cream-filled canals come four travelers: Oleg, a New York locksmith; the beekeeper November; Ludovico, a binder of rare books; and a young Japanese woman named Sei. They've each lost something important—a wife, a lover, a sister, a direction in life—and what they will find in Palimpsest is more than they could ever imagine.

## Palimpsest Details

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Author : Catherynne M. Valente

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## From Reader Review Palimpsest for online ebook

### Tracy says

I finally finished this. I've been reading a little here and a little there for weeks and I finally finished this. I think it took me so long to read for the reasons Nataliya described in her review, the book alternately pulls you in and pushes you away. It is so filled with loss at times it was unbearable to go on. But I'm glad I did. For one thing the writing in this book is exquisite. Catherine Valente is a poet and it shows:

"She had dreamed heavily and the dream clung to her still-November had always been a prodigy of dreams. Her father, a librarian, had made her write them down, and perhaps this had been the beginning of the slim brown books which now numbered so very many. She dreamed in color, more than color, in shades of gold and scarlet impossible in the waking world. She dreamed in languages she did and did not know, she dreamed strange and wonderful faces, narratives of recursive complexity, and her recall was meticulous, detailed, perfect as a list."

"She often felt that she chased the ideal cup of coffee in her mind from table to table, the rich, thick, creamy coffee, spicy, bittersweet, that betrayed no hint of thinness or chemical flavoring, nothing less than total, fathomless devotion to the state of being itself. Every morning she pulled a delicate cup from its brass hook and filled it, hoping that it would be dark and deep and secret as a forest, and each morning it cooled too fast, had too much milk, stained the cup, made her nervous."

And that is the author writing prosaically about every day things...her descriptions of Palimpsest itself are fantastic, gorgeous. Palimpsest is a city, a sexually transmitted city. You fuck someone who has been there, who bears the tattoo of its streets somewhere on their body and you awaken in Palimpsest. When you fall asleep again you wake up back in this world with the tattoo somewhere on your body. The next person you fuck (if they haven't already been there) catches the city and the tattoo from you. It's like a drug, you are addicted. You become desperate to go back. You will fuck anyone to go back. "But this is how you do it: through the body and into the world. You fuck; you travel. That sounds crude, and you know usually it is. It's usually ugly, and fat, and sweaty, and lonely. Luckily, it's also usually quick. But afterwards ... we find a place where we belong."

When you enter Palimpsest the first time you are bound to three strangers who have entered Palimpsest for the first time at the same instant as you. In order to emigrate in Palimpsest you have to find those three strangers and have sex with them, and enter Palimpsest together as a group. Some of these groups of four are splintered by the death of one of the four, some groups are destroyed because one of the four can't bear the city...it is too much, too beautiful, too colorful, too depraved. Some groups are never able to find each other and are so reduced to mindlessly coupling with anyone, anyone just to get back. The anguish of these lost souls trying to find their way back is like a tearing at the heart.

This book isn't for everyone obviously. Some will object to the sex, others don't care for poetry. Some will find it too dark and too sad. But it is beautiful. I'd like to find some of Cathrynne Valente's poetry I think.

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## **Phrynne says**

I laboured through this book, determined to finish it and not really enjoying much about it at all. The prose is beautiful but very heavy going and it goes on for 367 pages. It takes a lot of concentration and effort to keep on top of who all the characters are and I did not feel it was worth it in the end.

This is the second book I have tried by this author and I guess I now have to admit her writing style and I do not go together.

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## **Sandi says**

Palimpsest is one seriously weird book. Consider the concept: If you have sex with someone with a map tattoo, you will "dream" that you are in the city of Palimpsest. Palimpsest is a really f'd up place, but people are desperate to go back. They are so desperate to go back and visit other parts of the city that they will have sex with anybody who has part of the map tattooed on them, sexual attraction and orientation have nothing to do with anything.

While there are a lot of sexual encounters in Palimpsest, none of it is erotic. It's quick and desperate. Each encounter leaves the characters and the reader emptier than the last. The characters aren't even attracted to the people they have sex with. It's especially uncomfortable when heterosexual characters are having homosexual encounters that they don't want but need so they can return to Palimpsest.

The city of Palimpsest itself is surreal, like a dream or a nightmare. It's full of improbable people, impossible places and undefinable rules. It can only be reached by way of post-coital dreams unless you find the secret way to become a citizen.

I give this book three stars because I'm not sure if I liked it or not. The writing is evocative and poetic. It captures the surreal quality of dreams perfectly. However, the desperation got to me. It was depressing and I never did quite figure out why the characters wanted to be a part of Palimpsest so much. It was like a drug and the story had a psychedelic quality to it that didn't quite appeal to me. However, I do give Valente points for creating something that was unlike anything I have ever read.

Palimpsest is a Hugo Award nominee this year, but I'm not really sure why. It strikes me more as psychedelia or surrealism than SF&F. I suppose if you assume that the city of Palimpsest is real and that the map tattoos and everything that happens in the city are magic, then it might be borderline fantasy. I just didn't interpret it that way.

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## **Sandra says**

I have to think about this one a while. What a weird experience.

9/21 - after mulling a while, I decided on 3 stars because I both loved and hated it. I decided I had to read it almost stream of consciousness as it's written, since stopping to ponder the words detracted from the mood. At times I was annoyed, irritated, aggravated by the characters. At other times I felt an almost unbearable soaring of spirit and longing along with the characters. At times I almost stopped reading wondering why I was subjecting myself to such misery; at other times I couldn't stop reading I was so enthralled.

I'm totally mystified as to why this was in the running for a Hugo award. Isn't that an award for science fiction? I don't think this book is science fiction. I keep trying to decide what it is and think it's some sort of poetic metaphor for following one's bliss, for finding where passion takes one, for seeking one's meaning in unusual choices that are definitely against the norm.

The author most definitely has a gift for using words almost as paint brushes or as musical instruments to create a mood larger than the meaning of the sentence or paragraph. It's worth a read if only to experience this strangely wonderful phenomenon.

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### **Stefan says**

The first thing that strikes you about this book is the gorgeous prose. Every sentence is crafted with the utmost care, resulting in a novel that almost reads like poetry. It simply begs to be read out loud. I've read many books that attempt this kind of lush prose, but *Palimpsest* is one of the most successful and most beautiful.

*Palimpsest* is a sexually transmitted city. People who have been there have a small tattoo - a piece of the city's map - somewhere on their body. Sleep with them and you are transported there. When you wake up, back in the real world, you will find a small tattoo of another part of *Palimpsest* on your body - and you will want to go back.

The story follows four people who are all newcomers to *Palimpsest* - a young Japanese woman, a beekeeper, a locksmith, a bookbinder. They all have lost something in the real world and are naturally drawn to *Palimpsest*. As the story progresses, more and more details about their lives, and about the strange city of *Palimpsest*, are revealed. While the novel, at first, seems like four more or less independent stories, told in alternating chapters, slowly but surely a plot develops that connects everything and leads to a beautiful, bittersweet conclusion.

An interesting aspect of the novel is its strained eroticism. After the initial "connections" that introduce the four protagonists to *Palimpsest*, they find themselves wanting to return, which can only be done by sleeping with another "infected" person. The resulting scenes are almost uncomfortable to read - while they're at times fairly explicit, the sex is mainly a mode of transportation, something you have to get through.

This is a novel to read slowly and savor, because it'll just be over all too soon. I found myself rereading entire chapters after turning the last page. I would recommend this without hesitation to fans of China Mieville, but also to anyone else who appreciates a slow-moving, lyrical and entirely unique story. Absolutely gorgeous.

(If you'd like to check out a sample, here's a link to the short story "Palimpsest":  
<http://www.sensesfive.com/samples/pal...>)

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### **JW says**

There is a subgenre of fantasy (although some people would try to kill me for that classification) called "New

Weird". In my experience what this means is "interesting ideas executed in the most boring fashion possible." *Palimpsest* is exactly that. In particular, New Weird authors seem to get so caught up in their world building they forget to develop any kind of a plot, or at least spend so much time describing said world building that the plot doesn't appear until well into the book.

I don't like stories you have to "get". Intentionally cryptic storytelling, no matter how beautifully written (and New Weird writers do tend to write beautifully) is poor craft, no matter how you slice it. *Palimpsest* seems to be an overwrought rewrite of *Neverwhere*, rotating between 4 POV characters, but without, y'know, a fucking plot. This trade paperback edition is 367 pages long, somewhere in the 50s my eyes started skimming. I didn't mean for them to, but **NOTHING WAS HAPPENING**. Maybe there's some shit that pays off later, but how about giving me something now?

I don't need pictures, I just finished an exceedingly difficult read (one widely judged to have been a bomb, but I got the sequel the instant I heard there was one), I'm willing to dig through some shit, but I need some kind of reward. I'm not going to follow strange people doing strange things in some Narnia rehash that they don't even **UNDERSTAND** until the author decides I've toiled hard enough to get a tidbit of story.

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### **Carol. says**

Let's be honest. The reason this book has sat on my shelf for months is because it just isn't my style. Three months later and only halfway through, and I find it time to resignedly face defeat. I love Valente's lush prose; the vivid detail that appeals to all my senses and perfectly conjures a scene. I just have a hard time with the underlying sexually transmitted disease/desire imagery, and am finding the characters a challenge to care about in their obsession.

She--or I--might have bit off a bit more than is chewable in this one, with at least four different normal-world protagonists, and their various lovers. Many are from different cultures and countries, and when their experiences drop them into the alternate world, they frequently end up in new districts. Disorienting, and more than anything, reminded me of a kaleidoscope or a county fair at midnight on the last night. Confused, desperate and full of amazing images.

I'd recommend this book to someone who likes to play around with new ideas in erotic fiction, and with a tolerance for dense, voluptuous prose. She's an amazing writer (and person!) who deserves to be more widely known.

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### **Bradley says**

It is a reverence, a sting of the holy, as rich and powerful and desired as honey, and the book rolls on the tongues of paupers and kings alike, like fire, like hard cocks, like the welcoming embrace of a whole city. Indeed, this book is a love poem written by and scratched out by the city, itself, of *Palimpsest*, the fae kingdom of adulthood, of loss, abandonment, of scars and mutilations, of loveless sex and all the dirty waters of the world, of the ripe and blossoming heat of four who will finally make one, of the discourse of the bull and the serpent, and last, but not least, of all the maps of the universe, be they the eight-thousand door train or the touch of the third rail, be it the entire catalogue of all animals, imagined or real, plastered across the soul, be it madness and the touch of the wet lady, or be it the thousand bees in the belly, this is a novel of

such grand depth and squirming desire, that I am literally tongue-tied in tracing the map upon the skin.

Or, put a bit more simply, I liked this novel.

It was sadness given form, with just a hint of hope to flavor the flood of despair, of obsession and longing. It, like all of Valente's writing that I've had the immense joy of reading, has been so utterly well-read and well-crafted and so very deeply loved, never fails to amaze and shock and make me want to get on my knees and say, "I am not worthy."

There are a few technical things I'd like to say.

I've never read an author with such a confident use of semi-colons. She writes whole novels as if they were poetry. Indeed, the plot is never so easy to parse, and the very act of reading it requires nearly as much imagination as the author, just to make love to the words we read and fill it (or be filled) with a sense of completeness.

Never imagine that this is anything other than brilliant.

But then again, never imagine it is easy. This book is a lover that will show you all her dark secrets and then leave you as soon as she makes you hold her hair so that she may vomit over the side of your bed.

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## Ian "Marvin" Graye says

### A Book of Marvelous Things

***"I was so alone. I had only books and dreams and brushes then."***

The four protagonists, two male, two female, who live variously in California, New York, Rome and Kyoto, have their own separate obsessions - ***trains, keys, bees and books*** – but don't yet know true love. They crave ***"the low vibratory tones of shared obsession... real lovers, the kind that make coffee for each other and read the same books"***.

In this current world, they are taught two lessons: the source of all suffering is desire, and there can be no real love between strangers.

Yet each of them discovers a fantasy world, ***"Palimpsest"***, apparently under their own city, by surrendering to their desire and spontaneously kissing and having sex with a stranger, upon the body of each of whom is ***"a stain, a grid, a map"***, which turns out to be the only material evidence of the other world.

Yet, everybody (including the four) who visits Palimpsest ends up with a body mark that maps their own segment of the underground cityscape.

Until the four meet in the real world and combine their endeavours as a "Quarto", they can only visit Palimpsest in their dreams, a day at a time, and they remain skeptical whether it exists. Like the imaginary beasts in St Isidore's encyclopaedia, ***"Etymologiae"***, the relationship between Palimpsest and the real world

is as incongruous as "*an impossible beast sitting next to a possum*".

Still, they look at it as "*precious, like a pearl at the bottom of the sea.*" And so begins their quest to locate and migrate to this ***Palimpsestuous Paradise***, a world that won't necessarily welcome visitors or immigrants.

A novel that might appeal to fans of David Mitchell, China Mieville, Jeff VanderMeer, Nicholas Christopher, Ursula Le Guin, Umberto Eco, Joss Wheedon and the Matrix, it is both sexually explicit and sensual.

The sex is both hetero and homo, frequently up against a wall, "*on your feet or on your knees*", yet ultimately it is only the vehicle for a greater desire, love, passionate love, perhaps a passionate beast that may only exist, in its most idealised and perfect form, in Palimpsest.

The eroticism of the novel derives not so much from the explicitness, but ***the sensual beauty of the fictive world constructed by Valente***. We know what it contains and what it looks, feels and smells like.

Fruit abounds ... persimmons, pomegranates, figs, cherries, apples, pears, oranges, lemons... while everywhere there are objects of subtle and suggestive beauty: a walled world, snails, black coffee, a crème caramel, a black chaise, a glass cabinet, opera glasses, roaring trains, a viola, a parasol, long, low horns, leopards, gazelles, lions, lizards, horses, ostriches, a tourmaline beetle, gloves, bronze compasses, a calfskin dress, a scarlet and leather box. Enough of such objects, of such ***"nouns, make a verb, and we have made a verb, and it is us...Together we are one long book of marvelous things."***

For all of the appeal of "*Palimpsest*", it will no doubt be impossible for us readers to replicate this world of emotion in our lives. Instead, perhaps, all we can do is to make the same resolution as one of the protagonists: *"Things I will try to say more often. Why? I love you. I'm sorry. May I have chocolate? Yes, yes, yes."*

This might not be "*a list of things necessary for happiness*", but it's not a bad start.

On the other hand, it might just be the palimpsest of other possibilities that remains when we finish the book, at least for those who believe that ***"No lock will settle for less than its most and dearest beloved."***

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### **Megan Baxter says**

It's odd that, in trying to figure out how to explain this book, I first have to figure out exactly what is the sexually transmitted disease. It's not citizenship in the strange city of Palimpsest - that has to be earned. It's not passage to the city, as that has to be achieved, every time someone goes. It's the passport, I guess. The black markings of the city streets on the skin that never leave, that mark a person as someone who could go to Palimpsest, if they choose. Tattoo as sexually transmitted disease (okay, fine: infection. I know it's supposed to be infection these days. I just grew up with STD as the acronym and am having trouble switching to STI.)

Note: The rest of this review has been withdrawn due to the changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision [here](#).

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at Smorgasbook

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## Kelly says

Despite everything I am about to tell you, I really had several reasons to not like this book.

For one thing, the plot was really a bare excuse for one. It seemed like it was really more of an excuse for Valente to roam about at will, locking her mind's eye on new treasures to describe in the world she'd created. A search for character development yields little. The characters in this book have little 'development' to speak of. They are the incarnation, for the most part, of that Rice line- *"People never really change over time. They only become more fully what they are."* If there is an arc for any of them, it is really in their acceptance of the need to accept that, and for some of them, perhaps unwisely bury themselves in it and never look back. Those looking for symbolism will certainly find enough here to drive you mad. The book is rife with it. But since *we're all mad here*, it can sometimes add up to something on its own, and sometimes it only makes sense as part of a picture, and sometimes it only means nothing much at all- just a bit of color in the background. Trying to make sense of it is a useless, and in fact, pointless job. It might be haunting and floating through your dreams like figures in a Chagall painting, but if you try to untangle the web, the magic dissipates.

But for the most part, aside from some occasional discordant moments, none of that seemed to matter while I was reading this. No matter what it did, no matter what cold water of sub-par creation flaws I saw, Palimpsest always managed to hook me back in again. And it is entirely to do with the fact that its aesthetic, what it presents me to gasp and sigh and marvel at, the particular blanket of words that it slowly wraps me up with and whispers until I fall asleep, is made up of many of the ingredients of everything I have learned to find beautiful.

Palimpsest is a city within a city, of sorts. It was once an open metropolis which welcomed all comers through entrances that could be found in dark alleys, corners of restaurants, and glittering clubs, under river bridges, behind fallen logs and by descending down into the sewers. However, after too much use by those who would turn it to nefarious purposes, Palimpsest is now only accessible through accessing someone who has already been there. Namely, by sleeping with them. You will know them by the maps on their skin that show parts of the city they have already been privileged to visit. When they leave you in the morning, they will leave you with a map of your own to continue your journey. Since the entrances closed and left only this secret back door, there are fewer "immigrants" to the city. But they still exist- for one night at a time. Palimpsest lasts only as long as the night you spend with one of its older immigrants does. You must find it again and again each night the same way. Each encounter with an immigrant gives you more of the city.

Some who encounter it drink floods of alcohol and take avalanches of pills to forget it and to never go again. Others experience it as a dream and refuse to see it as anything else. Some few can bear to search for it from time to time and continue to live. (There are fewer of these.) Any of these choices still results in the temporary immigrant living with the city's mark on them.

Most who encounter the city, however, desperately try to get back. There is, almost always, something they love there, something they lost there, or perhaps, even, in some way they were born there. It makes sense. Palimpsest is a city of dreams: Though, it is absolutely no fairyland. It is the sort of dream that pulls out all the parts of the dreamer, the good the bad and the ugly, and the very very strange besides, and conjures them

altogether into an evolving, half-seen world that gives, sometimes open-palmed, sometimes only after terrible searching, everything you want and fear.(view spoiler)

How do you invest the city of dreams, where the streets are paved with magic more compelling than gold, with the sort of power that keeps drawing the tired, the poor, and the huddled masses, no matter how often they are thrown back into the sea? Valente chooses what I feel is the only appropriate means adorns her psychological phantasmagoria with what I can only describe as a rich banquet of words that take every opportunity to remind you that each small gesture, here, is experienced in an atmosphere that seems created by permanently heightened emotions and roiling hormones that never received notice to settle down into a sensible middle age. There are countless examples, big and small. However, Valente fittingly starts firmly grounded in what we would consider to be the real world, teasing out those who have the predisposition for Palimpsest out of the woodwork:

November, the queen of bees, one of the chosen four of the novel, does not visit back and forth between her parents, who *could not live with less than three mountain ranges to separate them*. Instead, *between them they strung their daughter, and like a shining black bead counting out refutations of love, she slowly slid back and forth, back and forth.*

Oleg, an immigrant in two world, first to New York and then to Palimpsest, has nothing but disdain for the New, which keeps his scorn bright: *"This is not a real place. Didn't you know? Didn't you guess? Everyone looked at it and looked at it, never blinking, working so hard at remembering, taking pictures and writing novels and never stopping, even for a moment, and when you look at a thing like that, you kill it, like the ant and the magnifying glass. There is no Manhattan left. We float in the black, and see the Empire State Building where there is nothing but void. What does it matter what we do in a place like that? Who we marry? If we lie?"*

Valente's immigrants are all on the hunt for home. One with no home, one who longs for a home that was long ago and never, another who has his apparently impenetrable castle irretrievably broken into and a final one who longs for nothing so much as a home that is always moving, as fast as may be. But they are all lead, whether they want to be or not, towards the kind of home that may never be found in the world that we go to work and school in. It's the sort that home generally, in fact, leads to utter ruin:

*"She dreamed in color, more than color, in shades of gold and scarlet impossible in the waking world. She dreamed in languages she did and did not know, she dreamed strange and wonderful faces, narratives of recursive complexity, and her recall was as meticulous, detailed, perfect as a list.*

*There had been such a smell in the place of her dream, of sassafras and the sea, bay leaves and dandelion seeds blowing wild, of coffee plants, of sweat. The smell burned into her; she had striven after it in the way of dreams until she could hear the starry surf on a bright shore.*

Valente knows that most people would find it better to deny it. Better to be safe. But some people know that they've been somewhere unaccountably better and refuse to settle for less:

*"Most of them... most of us, never figure it out. Bad dream, they think, or good one. Funny rash, never really goes away, but Doc says it's fine, nothing to worry about. Why dwell on it? But some people, they just can't let it go." He stares at the teetering houses with their enormous eyes blinking out of the windows. "Some people drink themselves out of school trying to find it again, trolling through bars where the shadows are so greasy they leave trails on the walls, just to find a way in, a way through. Some people forget too that you're supposed to stop sleeping, that you're supposed to have a life in the sun."*

*"Is it always dark here?"*

*"No, of course not. We just never come here in the daytime."*

*... "But it is a dream after all," he says to the woolen tide. "Nothing matters in a dream. It's just... crazy things, over and over until you wake up."*

*There is a long and somehow ugly silence. "Sure," Gabriel says, "just a dream," but his eyes are hollow, shallow and dim. "What else?"*

The people in this world certainly do not look or seem to be anyone's version of 'healthy' or 'happy'.

Palimpsest does not deal in those middling states. People are miserable, or in ecstasy. They are corrupting others, or granting someone else's very unwise dream, pursued relentlessly, despite many warnings. People are become animals to fight a war and have never been able to transform back into fully human again.

Eternal rot and decay seems to have set in on most of the houses where very few families are ever seen to exist. Babies are born formless and faceless and mindless and end up in thrall to whoever will slowly lick them into being. Most creatures you encounter are much more likely to send a chill down your spine, to leave you with welts and stings and missing limbs than they are to uplift you and make your skin glow, or transform you into some better angel of your nature. This is no Heaven. In fact, it is as likely to crush you and reveal everything about yourself that you never wanted to know. Ludo, the man whose home was invaded and ransacked, finds this out the hard way:

*"And he follows her eyes, eel-inscrutable down the stands from their scarlet and leather box. Two women sit far below them: a blond creature with a green scarf, her hair like water pouring over an emerald green riding uniform. Her gloved hand clasps the fingers of another woman, with coarse heaps of dark hair fastened with bronze compasses, graphite-nubs extending gracefully from their claws. She wears a calfskin dress, the exact color of her flesh. It is Lucia, of course it is Lucia, and her face is nakedly happy, a happiness it seems almost obscene to witness.*

*Ludovico calls out to his wife, and she turns her head slightly, but surely she cannot hear him over the cannonade of hooves and foot-pads below them, the sudden rain of pearls...*

*"Does this help you?" Nerezza says. "To see her, that she is here, that she belongs somewhere, that she is happy, that she has a lover, that she knows how to behave in the society? Does it fill up the place in you where she lived?"*

*"She can't hear you. If you fling yourself over the balcony, you will only bleed on the couple below us and break your bones on their chairs. Ludo, I brought you to see her, I didn't say that you could touch her, that you could bring her back. You are a cut-rate Orpheus, and she has already vanished behind you on the stone stair- you did not even feel her go."*

Valente has a lot of sympathy for the idea that, as 'unhealthy' as this metaphor for drugs and drink and escapism and obsession and whatever else you might name it to be, there's very little motivation, in the end, to leave it, when your experience is of:

*"She called out to the brassy city in her sleep, she touched the Memorial, the ostrich-orphan in the center of the road. She felt within her in such disappointment it those three strange folk who moved and ate and sang so far away from her. She felt the bees on her breast. She stood thirty nights in the shop of Aloysius, who shook his white-wigged head at her in such disappointment it pierced her true as his needles."*

*"There's a tenor there, at a place called Thulium House. He gives me sapphires every night; he pierces my arms with a long needle and hangs me with jewels until I cannot move for the weight. He puts opals on my*

*eyelids and kisses on my lips until I am bruised with him, and all over blue. Do you think I don't miss him?" "There is a train, full of strange fields and forests..." "I envy you!"*

*"The thing I am is called a Pecia. I am... like a machine. You would think of me like a machine. I am made of snow and of silver and of the bones of river fish. I am covered in the patina of cupolas. Made out of all the things that you remember about your childhood, about Novgorod and the Volkhov, out of a little girl in a red dress, out of wintertime. I was made for you.; there is a place where people like me are made. Inside me are not bones as you think of them, nor blood, yet the things inside me are also red and white as you know bones and blood to be."*

Even the chapter titles are like long, richly clad lists locating you somewhere it is hard not to want to consume more of: *"Coriander and Ultramarine,"* *"Quiescence and Rapine,"* *"Inamorata,"* *"Oblation and Legerdemain,"* *"Seriatim and Deshabille,"* *"Lassitude and Langour,"* *"121st and Hagiography."*

And by the end you know the truth of this: *"No nun has ever been saved by virtue from ecstatic visions of demons and angels breaking the stalks of one another's wings."*

This story would not have been out of place as a graphic novel, I think, or some other mixed medium that combined touch and sight and sound to create an the overwhelming experience that Valente's fingers clearly strained to create with every sentence. The whole thing reads like it really is yearning to break off the pages and absorb all your senses at once. I want it to have more resources at its disposal in order to accomplish its goal. Or perhaps I don't, perhaps I like it as it is, safe in everyone's imagination. At least then it lessens its potential to disappoint, by moving out of the somewhat nebulous and into reality, defining what each velvet word means.

Look, I get it. I get why some people won't like this, why you might not resonate to its tune. I understand, I do. If you haven't learned to catch your breath at rich colors richly and sumptuously applied in gorgeously complementary tones, it's not going to make you forgive this place. If it isn't your bag to pan back with the camera looking down on a marble circle of stairs rising, through which the sound of a Mozart Alleluia comes floating through, singing you to bed when *it is almost fairy time* or perhaps a more challenging mezzo's Habenera beckons you down, gowned in silks, when you had thought you would lounge in bed. You probably aren't the person who knew, at least at one time, what Emily was on about with *"resembles the eternal rocks beneath, a source of little visible delight, but necessary,"*. I think that you have to have at least the memory of an intense response to this sort of thing, to tapestries fully embroidered and unfurled, to panoramic shots, and the tiniest close ups of the flickers of hands.

These people know, and I don't think that it is wrong that I am put in mind of Cathy again and again, here, as she says that she has: *"dreamt in my life, dreams that have stayed with me ever after, and changed my ideas; they have gone through and through me, like wine through water, and altered the color of my mind. And this is one: I'm going to tell it - but take care not to smile at any part of it."*

Again, I understand if you can't help yourself but to smile. I do. I gave it three stars and I know all the sensible reasons why I did that. But if you can remember a time when you didn't, then you might want to step into Palimpsest. You might inhale it the way that I did. Here's a final test. Do you know what this means?:

“Sacred places, November. You owe them something. You stand between them and the rest of the world, or else the world gets its ugly, stupid way.”

Then visit Palimpsest. You won’t regret it.

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## Ben Babcock says

Books create whole other worlds, and nowhere is this phenomenon more explicit than in fantasy and science fiction. More than just telling a story, great books transport the reader to a new setting, one where the rules might be different. It takes impossibilities and makes them possible. The author, then, is more than a storyteller—he or she is an architect, a craftsman executing a careful and intricate design. This is what we often mean when we speak of *worldbuilding*.

Depending upon how the term is used, worldbuilding can entail praise of an author's mastery of the art, or it can be a consolation prize for a perceived lack of plot. Indeed, many of the reviews I've been reading of *Palimpsest* use the term, or its equivalents, in the latter way. The city of Palimpsest is a beautiful setting—and character—but the book has a thin plot, thin characters. There is too much prose, too little substance.

It is true that *Palimpsest* is a very unique and bizarre creation. Catherynne M. Valente's writing is laced with appositive subtleties and allusive similes. As a result, the book itself is of an artistic and literary flavour that favours imagery and metaphor over the straightforward pace of narrative. I found *Palimpsest* difficult to embrace at first because of this atmosphere. It was too dream-like—too much like an actual visit to *Palimpsest*, minus the sex gateway—to catch hold of my imagination. Lacking an anchor, I floated aimlessly through the first part of the book, unable to connect with the characters or even understand their plights.

Valente's sexually-transmitted city is a masterful work of fantasy but not something I would consider true worldbuilding. Rather, *Palimpsest* is like a myth, or perhaps even an entire mythology unto itself. It has an origin myth. It has rituals regarding how to travel to the city, how to recruit new immigrants. There are myths pertaining to permanent residency in *Palimpsest*, complete with the tragic sense of loss possible when one comes so close to achieving this only to find the gates barred. *Palimpsest* itself is not much of a world, for we only get glimpses of its structure and society. As an idea, however, *Palimpsest* is fascinating. Valente hints at the beginning of the book how different *Palimpsest* is from our own world—clockwork vermin, for instance—but the true scope of the difference only becomes apparent by the very end.

*Palimpsest* is like that as a whole. It starts off strongly, stumbles, only to recover near the end and improve a great deal. Valente adheres rigidly to a four-chapter, four-intermission structure for each part of the novel. Each chapter/intermission pair focuses on one of the four protagonists and their visit to *Palimpsest*. After such a strong beginning, the story foundered because the protagonists were not sufficiently connected, and I was not much interested in their isolated, pathetic attempts to return to *Palimpsest*. The book improves noticeably once November and Ludovico discover the method for emigrating to *Palimpsest*, find each other,

and try to find Oleg and Sei. Suddenly there is a purpose to all this purposeless sex; suddenly, there is plot.

There is so much sex in *Palimpsest*. It has a functional purpose, and Valente makes it clear that, for most immigrants, this is a matter of need. They *need* to return to *Palimpsest*; indeed, those who reject the city find it necessary to self-medicate in order to keep from dreaming about it. *Palimpsest* is somewhat like a drug, but it is even more generally an obsession. Oleg becomes obsessed with finding the simulacrum of his sister, who died before he was born; Ludovico becomes obsessed with finding his wife, who left him for another woman; Sei becomes obsessed with staying on board a train in *Palimpsest* that seems determined to adopt her; and November finds a mentor in the mysterious, dangerous Casimira. Their obsession overrides their need for comfort in the real world, hollows them out, makes them shells of their former selves. Oleg loses his appetite, becomes skeletal and even more withdrawn than he was before. Sei's need to have sex with the right people to stay on the train route makes her feel degraded. November sacrifices fingers and her face in order to achieve some form of power, while Ludovico sacrifices his tongue to secure them chance—the merest permission to attempt—to emigrate.

For all of the empty sex and mentions of how New York City is an ersatz vision of itself, *Palimpsest* seems to lack many real relationships. Lucia leaves Ludovico after nine years; the other three protagonists are recluses to one degree or another. Oleg and Ludovico both accept simulated people as replacements for those they have lost. November and Sei focus their affection on non-human objects, bees and a train, respectively.

In this respect, *Palimpsest* belies the biggest myth of all, that of normality. There is *nothing* normal happening in this book, and that is for the best. From its story to its characters to its style, *Palimpsest* is a bizarre, mythical creation. It pays a price for this artistry, of course; many who are more comfortable with the conventional narrative of a novel will not appreciate this book's unconventionality. It needs someone stronger than me to appreciate it on those terms. For my part, *Palimpsest* is interesting in execution and effort, but such a very empty experience.

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### **Jen says**

This is urban fantasy where the main character is a "fantasy" city. You can't get to *Palimpsest* unless you've slept with someone who's been there. You can't get to any other parts of the city unless you sleep with someone else.

It's an intoxicating read. For the continuing presence of sex in the narrative, this is not a romance. It's mentioned, even described, but it's a vehicle by which the human characters are able to find their way around a city where they seem to be meant to be.

Like The Orphan's Tales duology, this book is lush with words. Valente paints pictures with her prose - prose that's almost poetry, but not quite. The sights, sounds, and tastes are vivid and linger after I've shut the book. It's a seductive world where dreams end up being more real than waking.

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### **Robyn says**

Definitely not for everyone, but read this if you want incredible, fanciful prose and entrance into a world defined by Valente's capacious imagination. An incredible journey to a city real and unreal.

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### Nataliya says

Did I, a brand-spankin'-new gynecologist, just read a book about a sexually transmitted city??? Yeah, I guess so much for that whole '*don't bring your work home*' thing...

*"To touch a person... to sleep with a person... is to become a pioneer," she whispered then, "a frontiersman at the edge of their private world, the strange, incomprehensible world of their interior, filled with customs you could never imitate, a language which sounds like your own but is really totally foreign, knowable only to them. I have been so many times to countries like that. I have learned how to make coffee in all their ways, how to share food, how to comfort, how to dance in the native ways."*

**Valente's trademark lush, ornamental, stylized, and vivid, almost paintbrush-stroke-like writing is amplified in this novel.** Every sentence is surreal, dripping with imagery, soaking with color, saturated with emotions. The writing is melodic and lyrical almost to the absurd, to the point that you almost want to shake it off you and return to the world of short phrases and transparent meanings. Valente is excellent at weaving a gorgeous tapestry of language, zeroing in on small details and scenes and describing them with such poignancy that you feel almost trapped in the surreal world that she creates. **It's wonderful to read it, but it's also almost exhausting, since everything is raw and on the edge, everything is exaggerated, everything is painfully exposed and amplified.** The words swirl, and so do the emotions contained in them. The disjointed and staggering narration, fading in and out like in a dream, is both enchanting and oppressing, and I did love the combination of those.

The rawness of emotions and at the same time the dreamlike quality of them is in the soul of this book. Forget the plot or the characters or any semblance of a traditional story. It's not about that. **It's about the pain of love and loss and loneliness. It's the story of loss and need and desperate longing.** It's a story about finding a place where you belong, where you feel alive, no matter how painful and hard and absurd the journey there may seem. It's not a story about finding a happy ending; it's about both feeling alive and just dulling the pain. It's about choice and the lack of it, desire and duty, fulfillment and abandonment.

**The world Valente paints with her word-strokes is weird to the extreme, surreal and dreamlike.** The main character here is a dreamlike fantastical city, full of magic and life and strangeness. The city of Palimpsest, filled with living mating trains, mechanical insects, houses living as small children, rivers of clothes and milk, chimerae, and love, and death. This is not a paradise for those who manage to find it; despite it being more 'real' to them than the reality, it is still angry and dangerous and full of its own prejudices and bigotry. **But it is a place for those who don't belong elsewhere** - like our four characters, broken and lost and tragic and pathetic and beautiful and repulsive all at the same time; multifaceted like the city of their dreams.

*"November has been taken, she knows this, and one does not argue with the one who takes. No one whose father was a librarian is ignorant of their Greek myth: when Hades hauls you into his chariot, you do not argue that he has been rude not to ask if you really wanted to go."*

*"This is Palimpsest, November. This is the real world. Nothing comes without pain and death."*

The back cover of the book talks about a *"lyrically erotic spell of a place where the grotesque and the beautiful reside and the passport to our most secret fantasies begins with a stranger's kiss..."* While I agree on the 'grotesque and beautiful' part, I want to question the erotic part.

Yes, this book is filled to the brim with sex (*as expected, since sex with strangers is really the only way to get into Palimpsest - you sleep with strangers, you get a mark on your skin, a palimpsestic rash of sorts, and then you have an urge to pass it on, and so it spreads, infecting others like a true STD*), **but after a few initial encounters the eroticism and any semblance of enjoyable disappears and the characters are left with sex as a chore, a means to the end**, casual past the point of enjoyment, undiscriminatory, dreaded by them, exhausting, unwanted, painful; sex as nothing more than a quick and undesired interlude on their way to their obsession. It is not erotic; it is exhausting. Like a true sexually transmitted disease, Palimpsest is accompanied by regret and pain. And I thought Valente handled that very well and showed it with grace and dignity while not softening the blows in any way. (*However, my gynecologist self cringed quite a few times at all the unprotected sex that the majority of them were having - I mean, c'mon, is Palimpsest really worth gonorrhea or warts or unintended pregnancy or syphilis? Seriously, people, stop for a second to put that condom on. Please.*)

*"But this is how you do it: through the body and into the world. You fuck; you travel. That sounds crude, and you know, it usually is. It's usually ugly, and fat, and sweaty, and lonely. Luckily, it's also usually quick. But afterwards ... we find a place where we belong."*

I was torn about the rating for this one. I'm a huge Valente fan, being completely won over by *Deathless* (one of the best books I've read this year), *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland...* and *Silently and Very Fast*. All of those have instantly grabbed my attention and held me, enchanted, in their charms and embrace until the very last page. *Palimpsest*, however, was a very different experience, **winning my affection very slowly, almost reluctantly, sometimes pushing me away, sometimes luring me in, but still in the end maintaining a firm grip on me - just like the surreal city of Palimpsest did on the four characters in this book.**

*"You need me," said Xiaohui breathlessly, pulling November over her, sliding hands under her belt to claw and knead. "You need me."*

*"Don't you mean 'I need you'?" whispered November in the girl's ear.*

*"No," she sighed, arching her back, tipping her chin up, making herself easy to kiss, easy to fall into, easy to devour. "You'll see. You'll see."*

I'm glad I did not give up on this book. While it has its flaws, while it's so heavily stylized that it almost throws you out of the story while simultaneously somehow immersing you in it, while endorsing choices and actions that I normally would very vehemently disagree with, this book did provide me with a very unique experience in one of the weirdest universes created on paper. It made me think and ache and sigh and long for things that lurk at the bottom of my murky soul. I loved the frequent mentions of *The Girl Who Circumnavigated Fairyland* - apparently written because of fans' requests after this book. **And for all of that, I'm rounding up the 3.5-star rating to 4 stars.** Valente's writing just has that something special that speaks to my soul, and I cannot resist it.

*"There are no tigers for us, just a city, waiting, and it loves us, in whatever ways a city can love."*

*"Maybe the tigers are there. Maybe they're just better at hiding than trains and tenors."*

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## Meg says

To summarize:

Pros: Crocodile conga lines. Logophile's dream. Rampant potential for "that's what she said" jokes. Rampant potential for terrible puns. Barry Manilow. Euphemisms. So multicultural. Pirate frogs. Rum. Talking animals. Taking everything out of context.

Cons: Frog psychic wrapped in ragged fox fur - PETA cries, foxes die. Bugs. Gregor Samsa. Ear sex. No lols. Strange analogies. Train vagina visuals. Sexually Transmitted Tattoos. Elitism.

Usually book cover summaries are so trite and boring that I only get about a sentence in before I abandonment and just start reading the book instead. The summary of Catherynne Valente's *Palimpsest*, however, was brought to my attention by a friend, and flat out wins the "I hope my friends, extended family and acquaintances don't see me reading this" and "I'm too embarrassed to even check this out at the library because the librarian is going to think I'm a freak" summary award.

I won't detract from the... unique summary by explicating the whole thing here. Instead, let me introduce you to my new favorite phrase from Catherynne (who shall henceforth be referred to as KitKat):

"Lyrically erotic."

What, like Barry Manilow?

(Also, the phrase "lyrically erotic" makes me think of ear sex. I'm not sure what ear sex is. I am sure that I don't want to know. Unless it involves Barry Manilow.)

Moving on.

I'd like to make a note here that if you're not okay with debauchery and/or cannot stomach reading it, this book is not for you. *Palimpsest* is basically on a permanent bunny level of sexery.

Within the first page, the author uses big words to the point it seems like she wrote the book with a thesaurus at her side, or that she was one of those kids that almost won the Scripps National Spelling Bee and has a chip on her scapula and something to prove. I love it. (I also keep word lists. Multiple word lists. For funsies.)

The whole shebang starts off with a description of a factory and its workers. This actually ends up being pertinent later (much later). The author quickly goes off into a pretty-worded tangent. Rinse. Repeat. The description of the factory workers makes me have awesome visuals of crocodiles in a conga line with lunch pails. Read it yourself to find out why.

This is just the beginning of numerous visual imagery-laden scenes. KitKat loves her imagery. She rarely

describes an entire scene, but instead narrows in on certain parts of it and then goes into minutiae. The rest is up to your imagination (which is great because my imagination is awesome).

There is a recurring scene involving a fortune telling frog in fox fur. (Is a frog wearing fur toadally wrong? At least it's not wearing tadpoles!) Apparently, there's some sort of freaky bonding thing that happens to whatever four people happen to sit in the frog's "fortune chairs" with you, which are more or less the "entrance" to Palimpsest (I say more or less because there's something else you have to do first).

I like to picture them sitting in something like this. But red.

[image error]

Also, the phrase "smells of sassafras and rum" was used in one of these little rendezvous, the latter half of which makes me think of Captain Jack. I now like to imagine the fox fur-wearing fortuneteller frog as fox fur-wearing fortuneteller pirate frog.

In case you haven't guessed by now, animals can talk in Palimpsest. It's like an R-rated Disney movie. Speaking of which, I've picked up another favorite phrase from a talking heron in the book, "I'll trample you thoroughly, see if I won't!"

There end up being four \*semi-main characters – Sei, the blue-haired chick (trains really steam her engine); November, the beekeeper who likes to get beesy in Chinatown; Oleg, a man with a passion for locks (cue Louis XVI jokes), written by an author with a passion for making everything somehow sexual; and Lucia, the bookbinder's wife. I can't think of any good innuendo involving bookbinding right now, but you can go ahead and imagine that I did.

\*I say "semi" because the book eventually ends up narrowing in on one particular character, though it's pretty evenly split in the beginning of the book. Also, the main "character" of the novel arguably isn't even a person at all.

They all get into Palimpsest by having sex with someone who's already been and then going to the pirate frog fortuneteller. They must have more sex to get around the city. Everyone who has been to Palimpsest is marked with some sort of dark tattoo-like thing. I just visualize this, because it makes the whole thing more entertaining:

After you find all of this out, the book suddenly turns into a war novel, which is somehow connected to the factory, which somehow connects to one of the aforementioned main characters, who becomes the focal point of the story. I won't ruin the surprise for you (even though I want to). Chaos (and sex aplenty) ensues. Interestingly, it also turns into an addiction novel, of sorts.

Basically, the book has all the mindfuckery of Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy with sex instead of funny, which leads us to the main shortcoming of the book – its relative lack of humor. Barely a joke was cracked. A few pithy side comments here and there, but no witticisms so great as to warrant you stealing it and telling your friends you came up with it yourself (you know you do it, too).

If I had to chose one word to describe this book: Sexcellent.

But really. While there were certain aspects of the book I found unnecessary if not leaning towards slightly distasteful, I cannot deny that this was an interesting read.

One thing that consistently irked me was the narrator breaking the fourth wall. It seemed trite, awkward, and unnecessary, and generally served to mar what was otherwise a very fluid novel.

On the other hand, KitKat has an incredible knack for anthropomorphism. In many cases, she quite literally humanizes animals and inanimate objects in a way that almost makes you feel more sympathetic to them than the actual human characters. She also manages to create a transient, not quite lucid, dream world which is every bit as ungraspable, ephemeral, and addictive to the reader as it is to the characters in the book. Despite all the horizontal limbo-ing going on with the main characters, the book still manages to be beautiful, in its own unique way. I would recommend it.

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### **Gabrielle says**

3 and a half stars, rounded to 4.

The first thing you need to understand when you crack open a Catherynne M. Valente book is that she is a poet who writes novels. Her sentences and descriptions are dreamlike, her words carefully chosen but often surprising. I would personally like to find a good seat in that woman's brain and just watch her thoughts fly by because the images she conjures are often some of the most beautiful ones I have ever read.

A criticism I have often read about her is that there is a lot of style over substance. And honestly, that does happen. When you get lost in the beauty of her language, her plots can sometimes get a little confusing. But to me that's a minor irritant because I just love to bask in the whimsical beauty of whatever the Hell she feels like writing.

I put this book on my "erotica" shelf, but there is a lot more to it than sex. In fact, the sex quickly becomes a means to an end and is not the focus of the story very long. Because this story is about cities, about our inner worlds and how beautiful and guarded those secret places within ourselves are, and how hard it is to access them and truly understand them. Yes, there is a lot of sex in this book, but I found it made me ponder the nature of intimacy much more than carnality.

Palimpsest is a sexually transmitted city: only by sleeping with people who have already been there, and wear its mark on their skin, can you access it, and once you have, the city will obsess you and you will only care about going back. People who have visited Palimpsest can recognize each other: something in their body language gives them away just as much as the partial map of the city that appears on their skin, like a tattoo or a scar. The book follows the journey of four such visitors: a Japanese train enthusiast, an American beekeeper, a Russian locksmith and an Italian bookbinder.

The book is composed of vignettes of our four characters in our world, and their attempts to go back to Palimpsest, and then what happens to them when they are in the elusive city. Everything is beautifully written, but to be honest, nothing much happens... The quarto is finally given a sort-of goal about halfway through the book, but even then, things move at a snail's pace.

My husband had an interesting theory about the way one's first visit to Palimpsest and getting the strange

map tattoo could be a metaphor about losing one's virginity and how being sexually active affects one's view of the world, how it influences interactions with people (who are now also potential partners) and changes one's behavior. He has a point: sex does change a person, and not just the first time. Various experiences do leave their mark, whether on the body or on the mind: it can be a disease or a pregnancy, but it can also be a cherished memory or a regret.

The story could also be taken to be about being haunted by a place, a memory that left a really strong mark on one's soul and the fruitless quest to recapture it. I am noticing a common theme favored by the New Weird writers: Vandermeer has *Ambergris*, Mieville has *New Crobuzon*... All these imaginary urban landscapes are fascinating, baroque and beautiful creations, and now I feel like I should read "Invisible Cities" and see where their inspiration seems to have come from.

I am rating it 3 and a half stars rounded up to 4 because really, Valente's prose is just so freaking beautiful that I can't find it in me to round it down. That being said, "Deathless" and "Radiance" had actual plots, which made them much more enjoyable reads (for my structured mind, anyway). "Palimpsest" is a gorgeous but ultimately frustrating read.

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### **Heidi The Hippie Reader says**

Sex and sleep with a marked individual is the way to the city of Palimpsest, a mystical and deadly place that exists beyond the borders of our world.

The first time you cross over, your spirit is bound with four other travelers. For what purpose, no one knows.

*"Where you go in Palimpsest, you are bound to these strangers who happened onto Orlande's salon just when you did, and you will go nowhere, eat no capon or dormouse, drink no oversweet port that they do not also taste, and they will visit no whore that you do not also feel beneath you, and until that ink washes from your feet... you cannot breathe but that they breathe also."* pgs 4-5, ebook.

A visit to the city leaves a visible mark on your skin, a map of the location you visited. You cannot travel beyond the borders of where you have already been, unless you sleep with someone who has a different map.

*"It's like a ticket. And once you've bought your ticket, and been to the circus, ridden the little red train, then you can sort of see other people who've done it, too. They walk a certain way. Smell a certain way. Their whole body becomes like an accent."* pg 42, ebook.

Palimpsest is so beyond belief, some people who have been there can't believe it is more than a dream, at first.

*"But it's a dream," Oleg insists. "It was fun. We won't even remember it in the morning." "You don't know anything, Oleg," sighs Gabriel.* pg 73, ebook.

But, no one has ever woken up from a dream covered in blood.

*Palimpsest* showcases Catherynne Valente's mammoth imagination and descriptive powers. The pieces of the city she allows readers to glimpse draw you in and make you want to see more.

Each location is unique, has its own backstory and feel. It's an extraordinary work of urban fantasy.

*The gates of sleep are two, a gate of ivory and a gate of horn. He had been horrified as a child, picturing a great door of tangled antlers and tusks. Surely that was the gate of Palimpsest.*" pg 144, ebook.

It's disturbing to read the main characters become more and more desperate to re-enter Palimpsest.

The way they seek out sex with strangers reminded me of a drug addict's desperate search. The cost of entering the city is too high.

It ruins peoples' lives.

I read *Palimpsest* years ago and couldn't finish it then because the narration made me feel sick.

I think the trouble was that I used to put myself into the stories I read, imagining myself as the hero, villain, every part.

I've ceased doing that, at the cost of some grand adventures. But, in hindsight, it also allows me to navigate my way through stories I would not have been able to touch back then.

Because of its content, I'd recommend *Palimpsest* only for mature readers and fans of urban fiction. It's a strange trip, but full of wonders if you can endure the cost to get there.

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### **Jenny (Reading Envy) says**

Anything I say about this book just will not do it justice. It can't describe how I found myself holding my breath at writing that felt so intimate, almost like I shouldn't be reading it. Completely immersive and beautiful and disturbing and I can't wait to go back and read everything else she has written.

Kind of like if Jeanette Winterson and Neil Gaiman wrote a book together, after reading *The Pillow Book*.

I hadn't heard of Valente yet, and only read her because this book was nominated for the Hugo for 2010. I hope it wins, definitely my favorite of the six.

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### **Jacob says**

July 2010

Palimpsest. What a city. Entered only in dreams, its streets and districts are marked in the flesh. Its maps appear tattooed on the skin after sex. Copulation with other people (victims? sufferers?) who bear the marks grants more access; every orgasm is a ticket to another street corner, another station. It is the strangest of venereal diseases: the city as STD.

What I want to know is, how did Catherynne M. Valente get to this before China Miéville?

It's probably for the best. Where New Crobuzon would itch and ooze and drown in mites, *Palimpsest* only burns. It shines. As infections go, it is the most addictive: one time is not enough for those who bear the maps, but too much of the city, like too much of anything else, will only end badly. Only some streets are open, only some doors unlocked, and you can only visit, never stay. You will drown in sleep.

Unless you find the others. New immigrants to *Palimpsest* enter the city in fours, and the latest Quarto is a special one: November, beloved of bees, draws the eye of the city's unofficial (and controversial) mayor/general/queen; another, Sei, is adored by the city's half-feral trains; Oleg has the ghost of his sister to find; and Ludovico has lost too much already. The city will be theirs, or they will lose themselves while trying.

As other reviewers have said already, *Palimpsest* is lush, intimate, erotic and lyrical, intoxicating and fantastic and breathtaking and weird. Valente's story is addictive, her style is rich and heavy; together they combine to form something amazing. Were it not for the two confusing male characters, Ludo and Oleg (slightly indistinct, somewhat dull, occasionally hard to tell apart), this would be a perfect book. As it is, it's good. It's damn good. It's really, really damn near perfect, but you should read it no matter what I say.

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