



The Long Room

Francesca Kay

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Set in London in the early eighties, award-winning novelist Francesca Kay's third novel tells the story of a spy who falls for the wrong woman.

What happens to a man who has his ear pressed to the lives of others but not much life of his own? When Stephen Donaldson joins the Institute, he anticipates excitement, romance and new status. Instead he gets the tape-recorded conversations of ancient communists and ineffectual revolutionaries, until the day he is assigned a new case: the ultra-secret PHOENIX. Is PHOENIX really working for a foreign power? Stephen hardly cares; it is the voice of the target's wife that mesmerizes him.

This is December 1981. Bombs are exploding, a cold war is being waged, another war is just over the horizon and the nation is transfixed by weekly installments of *Brideshead Revisited*. Dangerously in love, and lonely, Stephen sets himself up for a vertiginous fall that will forever change his life.

As beautiful as it is intense, *The Long Room* is the dazzling new novel from an award-winning writer. With her mastery of the perfect detail, Francesca Kay explores a mind under pressure and the compelling power of imagination.

The Long Room Details

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Author : Francesca Kay

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From Reader Review The Long Room for online ebook

Barbara says

A well-written, multi-layered story of a 1980's British intelligence officer, who listens to tape-recorded conversations of "ancient Communists and ineffectual revolutionaries." Assigned to a new case, the lonely and isolated Stephen falls in love with the wife of his contemporary target, who is suspected of being an internal leak at the agency. I was drawn to Stephen, his real life and his fantasy life from the very beginning. Despite the measured pace, Kay's characterization and sense of time/place are equally excellent. However, the addition of a "suspicious character" in the last quarter of the book seemed like an "oh, by the way," and Stephen's resultant behavior seemed out-of-character. I had imagined several different endings to *The Long Room*, none of them especially happy, but I found the one offered not only disappointing, but also difficult to believe.

Margot McGovern says

Twenty-eight-year-old Stephen is a listener. He spends his days in the long room at the Institute playing back tape recordings of phone conversations between spies who have been persons of little interest since World War Two. When he joined the Institute, fresh out of Oxford, Stephen imagined his life would be one of espionage and intrigue, and that at the Institute he would finally enter a rarified, secret world that he sought and failed to find at university. But his work at the Institute is dull and monotonous, and he's twice been passed over for promotion. He lives alone, has few friends and spends each weekend with his ailing mother, Coralie.

Meanwhile, all around Stephen, his fellow Brits are equally disillusioned. It's 1981, Margaret Thatcher is at her least popular, *Brideshead Revisited* is screening on television, Christmas is fast approaching and Britain is sick with yearning for a past that never was and a future that will never be.

Stephen's one case of interest is a potential double agent working within the Institute. But it's the agent's wife, Helen, that draws Stephen's interest. Though he's never seen her face, he begins to imagine their life together, drawing closer and closer and increasingly blurring fantasy and reality until he can no longer distinguish between them.

Meanwhile, Stephen's mother shapes her life around the routines and traditions she has observed since Stephen's boyhood, thinking only and always of her often-absent son, the husband and children she has lost and the family she might have had.

Francesca Kay's *The Long Room* (Faber & Faber, Jan. 2016) is an unsettling novel of yearning, desire, disillusionment and obsession.

I'm just going to come right out and say this: I. Loved. This. Book. And I know it's only January, but I've already marked *The Long Room* as one of my favourite reads of 2016. There's an unofficial rule in book reviewing that you're not supposed to liken a book to other books, but whatever. If a Highsmith got busy with Eliot's *The Wasteland*, *The Long Room* would be their love child. And it reminded me of so many other favourite titles, too: *Brideshead Revisited*, *The Secret History*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Strays*, *The Line of Beauty*—stories of characters barred from paradise, yearning to return to a place they have never been.

Kay lingers over mundane and domestic details, steeping her reader in the drudgery of Stephen and Coralie's lives (her style reminds me so much of Highsmith), and then, quite without warning, ascends to flights of poetic fancy, referencing the poets Steven studied at Oxford—'Baudelaire, Bryon, Dante, Donne, Herrick, Keats, Marvell, Marlowe, Christina Rossetti, Shakespeare and Shelley' are among those named in Kay's acknowledgements. These departures come as a welcome reprieve, reminding both Stephen and the reader of his vision of a greater life (a life which he believes his right) that leads him ever closer to his downfall.

Kay narrates in third person, following Stephen and Coralie and occasionally zooming out to give a broader view. However, it is Stephen Kay shadows most closely. Initially, he's sympathetic: a lost and lonely soul overwhelmed and unprepared for the world's indifference and his own ordinariness:

"Dust metal breath and roar of an approaching train: too bright, too loud, too fast. The doors slide open. to propel himself inside them, to give himself up to those devouring jaws, requires effort of the will. Within the carriage, when the train plunges back into its tunnel, Stephen's face reflected in the window looks pale and moon-like, imbecilic. He remains standing and he stares at his reflected self. *Mon semblable, mon frère*. I never knew death had undone so many."

But as Kay draws the reader closer, she reveals Stephen as a man convinced of his own cleverness and uniqueness—a man entitled to a place among the *crème de la crème*:

"No one is the sole author of his life. Stephen, looking back, sees his own divided into chapters—before school, junior school, secondary school—in which his younger self was swept along by the tide of other people's actions. ... He remembers how sure he was in the beginning that that ... [Oxford] would contain an open door, the door that would magically yield to a secret password and give onto a new and better world. ... The seventy-two weeks that are all you get of stone staircases, linenfold panelling, low-lying mist on mown grass, girls in silk and rainbow colours—they don't give you time to turn yourself from the boy you were into the man you want to be. But they do show you where the doors are and how to forge the keys."

Stephen fixates on Helen as his 'key' to this better world. And as his obsession with her grows, it becomes increasingly uncomfortable to be privy to his thoughts:

"If he made a move too soon, he would scare her off. He'd rather sever his right hand than cause her to be frightened. When the time comes he will approach her gently, as he would a shy, wild creature—a kitten or a fawn—step by slow and careful step, holding out a coaxing hand until he gains her trust."

Meanwhile, Coralie prepares for Christmas, counting the days until her son returns home. She fusses over the tree and decorations that have remained unchanged since Stephen's boyhood, frets about where she'll store the turkey and buys Stephen a jumper like the ones Sebastian wears in *Brideshead Revisited*. Alone at night she wonders how many more Christmases she has left and if there will come a time when Steven will no longer come and she be left to pass the holiday alone.

In this way, Kay builds slow-burning tension, with the narrative gathering speed as it descends towards inevitable tragedy.

The Long Room won't be for everyone. It's sinister and bleak and infused with a damp, seeping melancholy that I could happily wallow in for many more pages, but won't necessarily appeal to all. Some thriller fans may also find the pace too slow—there are no sudden twists, no unexpected movements, just a steadily mounting sense of unease. But for me, the only criticism was that it was over all too soon. Kay has two other novels: *An Equal Stillness* (2009) which earned her the Orange Prize for New Writers that same year and

The Translation of the Bones (2011)—I've added both to my reading list.

Thank you to Faber and Faber for providing a copy of The Long Room in exchange for an honest review.

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Tina Price says

A curious telling of a descent into confusion, if not actually into madness. Stephen, the focus of the novel, is a lonely man, working as a listener for the Secret Service, in post War, early sixties London. Days spent listening to his targets is as isolating as any job can be, and he lives a solitary life throughout. It's hardly surprising that his imagination takes over and that he starts to invent relationships with his subjects. His behaviour becomes more and more reckless as he flouts the extreme order and control of his working environment, ignores restrictions and seems to start to be involved in stalking the wife of one his subjects, apparently believing himself to be in love with her.

He makes assumptions, misidentifies people and moves from confusion to disaster, while around him his colleagues plan for Christmas, support other sections in vital work, deal with family emergencies and the daily trials of working in central London in a snowy winter. All of this detail is beautifully realised as is the sad and tiny life of his equally lonely mother, the grey life of the day to day delicately described and vividly brought to life.

The writing is absolutely perfect, but, to my mind, the plotting of this novel falls apart in the final section, the role of one of the key protagonists being less than clear. However, the reader is left aghast at some of the things Stephen does, 'What is he thinking?' is the question constantly being asked as he pockets tapes, snatches files, sneaks about parts of the office building for nothing more than curiosity. A really clever realisation of a sad and lonely man.

Nick Davies says

I very much enjoyed the premise of this novel, the set-up (a young man employed in surveillance falling for the wife of one of the subjects who he is monitoring), and the descriptive style was very effective in creating a complex and confusing atmosphere, dark, threatening, drawing in the reader complicit with what was happening - though never quite allowing everything to be understood.

It was this, perhaps, which was one of my two main issues with the novel. Perhaps the fault lies with me not concentrating hard enough, perhaps the author could have been more complete in her explicit and implicit balance, in any case I felt I 'got' most but not all of what was happening. The more problematic aspect for me was that the central character started to behave in an increasingly unrealistic fashion - taking risks, blundering from one poor decision to the next, letting his heart rule his head. It was an impulsiveness and a strangeness which I just couldn't square with my expectations of someone in his position and of his nature as described in the early part of the book.

So certainly an interesting and atmospheric novel, but one which for me failed to deliver on its early promise.

Amy says

“This has been a rough year for folks on both side of the Atlantic. Brexit shook England to its foundation, while Americans continue to experience our own fracturing in the face of one of the strangest and most divisive elections in recent history. In this time of confusion--existential dreading, even--a book like this one grabs at our deepest fears and offers them up for examination.”

Read the rest of my review over at the Dallas Morning News!

<http://www.dallasnews.com/arts/books/...>

Sandra says

I was hugely disappointed with this. Recognising the writer's name, knowing I already had 'An Equal Stillness' on my bookshelf, I assumed this would be as entertaining. It was not. A totally feeble (and near-unbelievable, insofar as how could someone so unworldly be selected to do such a job) protagonist in a story suffocating in place- and time-evoking details of domestic ennui and acting in ways that were both banal and stupid.

I finished it but it left me feeling very cross.

Kate says

*** Originally reviewed on <http://thequietknitter.blogspot.co.uk/> ***

Stephen Donaldson is a Listener for the Intelligence Services, it's not quite the exciting position he'd hoped for when recruited from Oxford, but he's diligent and hopes for promotion one day.

A test of his abilities comes in the form of an ultra secret case named Phoenix, it's a delicate case, to be handled with the utmost secrecy.

As he listens to tapes of Phoenix's home life, Stephen becomes infatuated with Helen, he knows where she works, who she sees, the piano music she plays depending on her moods and believes he is in love with her despite having never laid eyes on her.

As the story progresses Stephen's obsession with Helen causes him to loosen his grip on reality, his disillusionment intensifies. If he could just meet her, tell her everything she might just love him back.....Running parallel to this are the actions Stephen takes in order to win the love of Helen, he takes risks that are so out of character, he becomes careless with aspects his work and lies to those who trust him.

A stark contrast to the young man described by his mother in the narrative, who, lamenting her own sorry tale takes pride in her son and what he has accomplished.

The intensity built by Kay in her writing is fantastic, the reader really does get a feel for the feverish need that Stephen has to hear Helen's voice on the tapes, the desperation he feels when he has to devote his attention to other cases - 1980s Britain was in the grip of strikes, bomb threats and in a state of high alert which meant that the Intelligence Agencies were generally kept busy.

Whilst the plot may give ideas of a gripping thriller, this book really doesn't fit into that category. This is not a fast paced thriller at all, and I think that works for this book, the intense doom you feel approaching as you read this becomes suffocating. The damp, depressing atmosphere depicted by Kay draws the reader in making this a compelling read.

That being said, I did find the end to be unsatisfying, I finished the book and shook my head at the character of Stephen Donaldson. He was meant to be a highly intelligent man, but made some incredibly bad (stupid) choices that sealed his fate, his naivety just didn't sit right with me. Many people have raved about this book, and I completely agree about the skill of Kay as an author, but this one just wasn't for me.

Nancy says

I am so disappointed. I really want to give this well written book a higher score. Unfortunately about two-thirds of the way through the lead character fell out of character. After that, I no longer had sympathy or empathy for him. It was almost as if in plotting the story, the author boxed herself in and had to stretch the character in a non-believable direction. Shame because the writing is beautiful.

Roman Clodia says

This is a chilling, claustrophobic story of obsessive love set in the milieu of a GCHQ-alike set-up in 1980s London. The story is seen through the POV of Stephen, a young 'listener': lonely, introspective, too easily separated from reality.

Kay controls her writing beautifully especially in her imagery of isolation and darkness. I found this a completely gripping one-sitting read with a dreadful pull towards the inevitable end.

Naima says

I received this book through NetGalley and Tin House Books in exchange for an honest review.

Was this a good read? No. Was it a *bad* read? Again, no. I walk away from Kay's novel with very little but prose and an eyeful of ruined romanticizations of stalking. I constantly waited for a twist that came only in the very last 6% of the book. Stephen is a dry character, and I noted that someone on the back of the cover said that he was an intentionally 'hollow' character. I can't find anything positive about having a hollow character who is somehow not even characterized to this hollowness. Everything about him centers on his increasing obsession with Helen, the wife of PHOENIX, the subject of an investigation he'd been assigned by a British Intelligence Agency. There's something to say about how Stephen is gutted of all characteristics (and how these characteristics are only informed by his mother's perspective), but very little characterizes his internal motivations other than a need for escape and a descent into fantasy.

This is by far one of the oldest galleys I kept putting down and making myself pick back up. It's not a bad read, but it is an exhausting read. I'm reminded of my fifth grade's writing lessons- a story should have rising action, a peak, closing action, then conclusion. As it's a thriller, I thought that stakes would be high- but Stephen consistently faced so little consequence that I couldn't actually care that he was (view spoiler). If there is no actual threat of consequence, there's no action- this book is more of a misguided romance novel, maybe even another deconstruction of the 'women are more than what men think of them' (manic pixie dream girl- though, in this story, she's very much so a married woman who Stephen reinvents into a waif needing saving by him in his fantasy) trope. But, like I've said on other reviews- if the woman cannot challenge this view, then it still stands that all we, as the reader, get to see of her is the man's construction.

Stephen's rapid obsession, if that is supposed to qualify this as a thriller, escalated so gradually that, only after thinking on it to write this review, do I think about how severe his actions quickly became. (view spoiler)

I lost track of side characters, for the most part- Alberic and Coralie, of course, stayed fairly central, and I think it's because they were written to stand out. Other characters, such as Charlotte and Louise, I got confused- to the point where what I assume was a large reveal ((view spoiler)) towards the end wasn't a reveal at all to me, because I had no idea who these characters were.

Regarding the end: (view spoiler)

It's a smart novel, but the themes presented are couched under too-slow plot development, and the purposefully-hollow main character forces the narrative to drag its heels far too slow for me.

Anne says

Stephen lives a lonely and isolated life. Each day is very much like the last; work, eat, sleep; and yet, despite his insular little world, inside his head is full of excitement and adventure, and dreams.

Stephen works for the Institute, sitting in the Long Room with his colleagues, each day is taken up with the conversations of other people. With his headphones clamped firmly to his head, Stephen does not have to take part in the ordinary office banter, or mindless chit-chat, instead he immerses himself in the lives of the people that he listens to. The listeners at the Institute spend their working hours eavesdropping on people of interest; old men who were once active and well-known for their communist dealings. Stephen is expected to trawl through the daily recordings of these telephone conversations and take note of anything that may be suspicious. This is not an exciting job, and Stephen's imagination is the one thing that keeps him from going mad.

When Stephen is assigned a new, top-secret case; listening in on a man only known as PHOENIX, he feels honoured and a little excited, and when he hears the voice of the target's wife Helen, he falls in love. Madly and desperately in love. Stephen's vivid imaginings create a whole personality for Helen, and Stephen is convinced that she is unhappy and mistreated.

Spurred on by his love and concern for Helen, Stephen begins to take risks that he would never have contemplated before he heard her voice. Stephen has always, in the past, towed the line. His colleagues think of him as a quiet, uninteresting man who has little to say to them, but his desperate need to do something for Helen makes him push his own boundaries, until he is very close to the edge.

Understated, gentle and so beautifully constructed; *The Long Room* is such an incredible read. Slow moving and finely woven, it explores the depths of the imagination and the impact that a voice can have on a life.

Francesca Kay has created a whole world within *The Long Room*, there's a feeling of the 1950s to this room full of silent listeners, in the days before the world wide web and mobile technology. The darkness of the shuttered room and the secrecy of the work that they do seeps into the story and transports the reader right into the heart of the Institute.

Stephen is a complex character, and the added back story, told from the point of view of his aging mother adds a layer to his character and enables the reader to empathise with him and appreciate why he sometimes acts as he does. His vulnerability and incredible naivety is astonishing, yet believable and the inevitable conclusion is heart-breaking.

Francesca Kay's writing is distinctive and forceful. Her sense of place is impeccable and her characters are carefully created. *The Long Room* is elegant, sensitive and intelligent. I enjoyed it so very much.

My thanks to Sophie and Hannah at Faber & Faber who sent my copy for review.

<http://randomthingsthroughmyletterbox...>

Bibliothekerin says

Desperately sad; one of those stories in which you know what will happen, and it's not good. How could Stephen have been so stupid? He realizes finally what it looks like he's done, and with a sick feeling realizes he has been duped. Poor Stephen; poor Corralie, his mum.

There is a surprise at the end, though; not about him, but about someone else, which saves the book from being completely predictable.

This story takes place in London, in 1981, a time when the Cold War was still raging, but unlike the US, England also had the Falkland (Islands) War to contend with, IRA bombings in London, and the Bobby Sands hunger strike in Ireland. Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister at the same time we had Reagan. We're told that Stephen works for the Ministry of Defence, as a "listener" (probably for MI-5, England's domestic intelligence gathering service). He resents being passed over for promotion, resents being stuck in a cubicle wearing headphones all day. He envisioned himself as a man of action, a spy (for MI-5 or MI-6). Why else was he trained in spycraft, he wonders? He's smart, not unattractive, a graduate of Oxford University. But unlike other Oxbridge alums, there was no Eton or Harrow for Stephen. He was a scholarship boy, growing up in a council flat, our equivalent of Section 8 (welfare) housing, with a single mum.

Painfully shy around women, never "one of the lads", he's a loner. Not happy being alone, either; he longs for love and friendship. Ripe for the picking by a Soviet spy.

Sarah Beaudette says

It is not the intrigue of spying but the intimacy of it that Francesa Kay explores in her hauntingly beautiful novel *The Long Room*.

Stephen Donaldson is a listener for the British government in 1981, which is to say that he spends the majority of his waking hours listening to the private lives of the defence ministry's targets. Via tapes from the bugged houses of these targets, Stephen forms powerful but one-sided relationships with people who will never know he exists. He hears the tense silence between a man and wife eating dinner together, he hears their drunken arguments, he hears them making love. It makes sense that Stephen, whose own life is desolately empty of intimacy, would fall in love with a woman he feels he knows better than her own husband, but who doesn't know him at all.

Despite its aching beauty and introspection, the *Long Room* doesn't quite live up to the spy novel's promise. Francesca Kay's sense of place and character are flawless and transporting, but the exquisite prose doesn't quite make up for the insubstantiality of the plot, which leaves a reader at loose ends. Even when compared to the more cerebral examples of the spy genre, the storyline doesn't take advantage of its situational set-ups; the twists come at the very tail end, are not quite believable, and aren't inter-connected. Of Stephen, I expected development toward an extreme. He was poised for it: his loneliness, intelligence, and passion made his psyche fertile ground for either ruin or healing. I expected either great or terrible things of Stephen, and in the end, he gave me neither.

Lillian says

This one draws you in until suddenly you realize there is no way out. I was reminded of the movie *The Lives of Others* (both follow spies who are listeners, one for the British government in 1981, the other for the Stasi in East Germany circa 1984) but on the whole they don't really compare. The movie was really, really good, this book was just ok.

Larry says

A lonely spy engaged in surveillance activity is drawn to the wife of his main subject. Given his lonely detached life, the agent's attraction leads to his destruction. It's a sad, well written book that reminds me as bit of the movie in which Gene Hackman, the ultimate eavesdropper-for-hire, descended into madness due to his isolation.
