



## Days of Grace

*Catherine Hall*

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## **Days of Grace** Catherine Hall

A tautly-plotted and suspenseful debut about an intense war-time friendship, a suppressed passion, a jealous crime, and a corrosive secret kept for decades.

## **Days of Grace Details**

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Author : Catherine Hall

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## From Reader Review Days of Grace for online ebook

### Talitha says

Een mooi verhaal, maar niet zo goed als haar andere boek (Het bewijs van liefde).

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### Aleksandr Voinov says

Really enjoyed this.

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### Elaine says

Bucking the "Goodreads" 3.5 trend, I give this one 5 stars. Nora is an apt narrator, alternating between her childhood in WWII England and her present life, facing a terminal illness. Depressing? Perhaps. Certainly sad event follows sad event. Still, Nora's strong voice, her courage, her unwavering love held me in their spell until her eventual sense of redemption.

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### Helen says

Days of Grace had me hooked from the very start. It is an excellent, well written, well plotted novel, which draws the reader swiftly in so that they feel the various traumas, pain and hurt of Nora's life, and have sympathy for what she has endured.

There are two narrators of this story - Nora as a 12 year old, evacuated to the Kent countryside from London by her mother at the outset of war, for her own safety, and a much older Nora who is terminally ill and approaching the end of her life.

Within the book Catherine Hall explores the themes of love, friendship, separation, loss, compromise and the realisation of being different to the rest of one's surrounding community.

Her writing is beautiful - the development of her characters is masterful, and her prose is beautifully measured and controlled.

The unhappiness of Nora's life and the sadness and loss she has endured does not make for easy reading, but the prose itself is a delight to read. I am looking forward to starting her second book.

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### El says

For me this book had great potential which wasn't quite realised. The story is of two very different girls, one an evacuee, the other the daughter of the family she lives with in Kent during WW2, who forge a deep friendship and learn from each other's differences. The narrative skips between the War years and the present day when Nora, the evacuee from London, is dying and reflecting on her life. I came to this book with high hopes that I would learn lots about life in London during the war but it was as if they lived in a bubble where the war hardly touched them. Having read Sarah Waters's The Night Watch, I was expecting more of the

same but this was war-light and I learned nothing new. How could Nora work in a factory all day but never recount a minute of it (until it was suddenly needed for one particular plot device)? And is it feasible that Grace would have got away with doing nothing at all for the war effort?

When reading this book I was continually thinking, "Good so far but you need to expand, elaborate, tell us more." Ms Hall would go so far but then stop so that I was constantly thinking, "But then what happened?" When the girls run away to London we hear nothing at all about Grace's parents and their reaction to the girls' flight and the girls don't discuss it. When what happens in the London flat happens we are told nothing further about the event which, to me, just seems like a cop-out on the part of the author. Couldn't she have used the device of a newspaper article seen by Nora to fill us in on the consequences of Nora's actions?

However, despite having to suspend my disbelief quite often, I still looked forward to listening to this book. The relationship between these girls from two different worlds (though not fully developed in the novel) was interesting as was the side story of Grace's parents which begged for further development. The present-day plot I found less interesting as its parallels with the past seemed to me to have been somewhat shoehorned in for balance.

The fact that the protagonist/narrator, Nora, was so unlikeable but the book was worth reading is testament to the fact that Ms Hall definitely has talent and I will definitely be looking out for more of her work.

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### **Fenriz Angelo says**

When i started the book i didn't know what to expect, it's in war times London so i suspected sad moments. And i wasn't wrong, while the book is a true page turner, the events that happen in the story have a bittersweet taste that ends up being mainly bitter and full of melancholy. I wouldn't categorize this story as f/f idk who the fuck thinks this is f/f, it has a lesbian MC yes, and her love for another girl and feel of strangeness the older she gets push her to situations that wouldn't have happen had she been straight, but i think the book is more about Noora's journey and how she made peace with herself.

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### **Misty Baker says**

I'm fairly certain this is the first time I have been completely clueless as to how to start my review. My normal banter seems wildly inappropriate, yet focusing entirely on the gloom, I feel will have an adverse effect.

When I first read the slip cover for "Days of Grace" I picked up two very distinctive things,

1. Struggling with the affects of war through the eyes of a 12 year old girl
2. Experiencing the inner turmoil of a lost love

but when it was all said and done, when I closed the back cover, and switched off the light, it occurred to me that what I got was so much more.

Troubled with the idea of loosing her daughter unnecessarily to war, Nora's mother does the unthinkable...

offers her up as an evacuee, and plops her on a train bound for the country, however, what her mother sees as a selfless act of sacrifice, Nora saw as abandonment. Unsure of herself (or her surroundings) Nora's mind starts to run wild, that is until she meets Grace. As a girl who is used to running free (and getting her way) Grace teaches Nora a whole world of things she never knew existed... books, beauty, and love... but when Nora's love continues to go unrequited, and her life suddenly starts to take a direct left, the place that she lovingly started to refer to as home, is not so welcoming anymore. In an effort to escape an unhealthy situation, and take control of her own future, Nora decides to runaway. With Grace, dutifully by her side, the two girls set out to experience the other side of life... the war torn, desolate streets of London. Will their love for each other be enough to battle the forces around them, will the shady side of their new home tear them apart, and will Nora ever accomplish the most challenging feat of all... forgiving herself for the things she has done for love?

“Catherine Hall” did exactly the opposite of what I expected in this novel... she focused on the negative. This story was not about WWII, or even an enduring friendship for that matter, what is was... was a story about a young girl so desperate for a family, that her own conscience created a mutilated web of abandonment issues, and internal punishment. The fact that Hall used such a significant, (and life altering) war as her backdrop only added fuel to the already abundant turmoil. Now... does the fact that this novel is so blatantly depressing mean that I disliked like it? No... on the contrary, the writing (for being a debut novel) was quiet impressive. The plot was split into 2 eras, both boasting the same narrative voice (Nora) but both in very different times in their life. Writing in this way not only allowed the reader to experience Nora's emotional unsteadiness as a young girl, but also allowed the reader to connect to her on a deeper level, as her age gave way to unfiltered thoughts of the past. The character development was astounding, (there was no way the story could have possibly made sense without it) but the thing that caught my interest was Hall's very straight forward way of relaying details. There were no paragraphs of flowery descriptives, letters of profession, or even filler chapters (which so many new authors rely on) instead, you had a straight forward plot, with a straight forward objective, with just enough twist to keep the reader from taking unscheduled trips in their own head.

Do I think this book is for everyone? No. The novel, as a whole, was well written, but remains a difficult read, and though it's lovely (in its own way) it remains sad. Only those truly dedicated to literary structure, and an artfully crafted story need apply, I'm afraid that everyone else will find it to much to handle, and consequently... be unhappy with the book as a whole.

Happy reading my fellow Kindle-ites and remember: Sometimes it's healthier to love the attainable, than to destroy our lives with the unattainable.

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### **Florence Penrice says**

After a promising start, I have given up on this. It would have been so much better if it hadn't morphed into the ubiquitous 'oh dear I'm a lesbian and the vicar made a pass at me' and I really can't be bothered to finish it.

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### **Anne says**

This book was told in two voices - Nora a young evacuee from London in World War 2 and also in the voice

of elderly Nora who is dying of cancer. It was very interesting how Nora was affected by this for the rest of her life and how damaged she was by her childhood experience.

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### **Lauren James says**

Described as Sarah Waters meets Daphne de Maurier, I was hooked on this book from the blurb alone. This is a beautifully written story stretching decades. Told in alternating timelines, it follows Nora, age 13, as she is evacuated to the countryside during the war, and becomes friends with a girl called Grace.

It also follows Nora, old and alone, as she realises she is going to die. For the beginning, we're aware that however idyllic Nora's new life and blossoming love in the country looks, this isn't a story with a happy ending.

Nora's feelings for Grace as very realistically drawn, and a true torment of unrequited feelings.

While this a very tragic read, with sad endings for almost all of the characters, it's so gorgeously written that I can forgive the use of the bury your gays trope. I felt truly immersed in the world, and really enjoyed the happier sections of the book. The scenes by the lake were especially lovely.

Hall has clearly done her research into wartime life, and the experiences of an isolated, lonely woman really broke my heart.

I cried, a lot. If you're looking for a book that will make you cry, then I recommend giving this a try. I would say that it's suitable for older YA readers. There are no graphic sex scenes but scenes of emotional maturity throughout.

For fans of Goodnight, Mister Tom, The Night Watch or Silhouette of a Sparrow.

Video review posted at <https://youtu.be/CFZNwCj4jEA>

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### **Irene says**

A simple premise, truthfully told of WWII London evacuees, reluctant children taken from grieving, yet unfaltering mothers and fathers to a safer haven in the English countryside. Thus, we meet Nora and her devoted mother as they part, forever lost in that innocent moment, never to physically reclaim that indestructible bond of mother and child.

Catherine Hall immaculately weaves the evocative narratives of Nora's ostensibly carefree and guileless countryside life with beautiful, charming Grace and her presumably conventional parents, Vicar and Mrs. Rivers. As secrets unfold, Nora and Grace clandestinely embark upon a haunting and gripping sequence of events in London, which culminate, in a perilous journey from innocence to guilt that will tragically consume Nora until her final days.

Finely embellished with past and present narratives, Nora Lynch's unexpected evolvement from lonely window peeper within her limited narrow world to an intrepid leap in her reluctant reaching out to another young woman in need, ultimately compels Nora not only to face, but to acknowledge and forgive her

youthful transgressions and to find comforting release.

Discomforting at times, yet undeniably forceful, Grace and Nora suffer unexpected hardships too soon, as Shakespeare reminds us: "...*My salad days, /When I was green in judgment, cold in blood...*"

Unquestionably, a most provocative read, not to be forgotten as I considered how many post-WWII young women faced overwhelming circumstances, and how each confronted resulting personal demons through vastly diverse paths.

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### **K. East says**

This book had a dark side to it from the start that almost put me off, but eventually, the main character grew on me and I wanted to know how it ended. This is the third book I've read lately that alternates chapters between two times in the life of the main character [or characters]. It's an interesting device, and it can make more interesting a story that might otherwise fall flat. This one lacked something in the telling that would have made it more immediate, more urgent. The historical background was interesting and made real, but I never really felt the depth of passion Nora had for Grace. Despite that fault, I still found it engrossing, hence the 4 stars.

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### **Yasmien says**

3,5

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### **Chris Wolak says**

Days of Grace by Catherine Hall is a psychological tale of friendship, love, and the corrosive effects of silence and unspoken feelings on individuals and families. The setting is London and Kent during the span of British involvement in World War II and contemporary London. Yes, its one of those novels that bounces back and forth in time, but it is done well.

TheBookseller.com, the UK's book industry magazine (similar to Publisher's Weekly in the US), recently posted a piece by Victoria Gallagher that reported on how book designers there may be missing out on not including blurbs and other copy on book covers. Gallagher's short article about how blurbs can help sell books states that research from Book Marketing Limited "found that the blurb makes 62% of consumers buy a particular book."

This is partially true for me. Its the first couple of paragraphs or pages of a book that are the deciding factor on whether I'll take it home or not (unless its on my To Be Read list for some reason). But when it comes to the initial browsing of books, blurbs and other jacket copy are often the reasons why I pick up a book in order to get to the point where I'll read the first couple paragraphs. Such is the case with Days of Grace.

The reason I picked up Days of Grace was the comparison made to Sarah Waters, one of my favorite writers,

on the back copy. Actually, that's not true. The real reason I first picked up the book was to re-shelve it because someone abandoned it on a chair at the bookstore where I work. But as I walked the book back to its proper section to re-shelve it, I read the back jacket copy and was intrigued. This is the first book that I've come across that offers a comparison to Waters. The next day I read the first few pages and decided to take it home.

Here's the blurb that snagged me:

"Sarah Waters meets Daphne du Maurier. Days of Grace does everything a good debut should: moves you, surprises you and restores your faith in the power of a novel. Hall writes beautifully about the exquisite pains of unrequited love." Harper's Bazaar (UK)

Days of Grace is Catherine Hall's first novel. Its a tragic love story about Nora Lynch, who is 12 years old at the opening of the book. She lives in poverty with her mother; her father having died in 1929 the mother takes no chance with Nora's safety and puts her on a train with other children being evacuated out of London. She ends up in Kent where she is taken in by the Rivers. Their daughter, Grace, spots Nora sitting in an animal pen where the children were taken after arrival. Grace begs her mother like a child at the dog pound, "Please, Mummy. Can't we have her?" (18).

And so the Rivers become Nora's surrogate family. Later there's a scene when Grace sucks a stinger out of Nora's arm, and when Nora looks at her arm she sees that, "On it was a red mark where Grace's lips had been, like the marks that the farmers painted on sheep to show who owned them" (118). The scene is revealing: Grace doesn't know the extent to which she does own Nora and Nora acts like a sheep when it comes to Grace. For all of Nora's fears about God's punishment, for example, she regularly steals and drinks communion wine--nicknamed Bad Blood--with Grace.

The earlier scene of Nora's life in London is dreary, gray, and lifeless. Nora and her Ma have only the barest necessities, but they have much love between them which is expressed in physical closeness. But for all her mother's love, she is silent about something every 12 year old girl should know about prior to it happening to her: Nora discovers she's bleeding in a stinking WC alone on the train. She thinks God is punishing her for hating her mother for making her leave. Mother and daughter exchange only one letter during the years they're apart and Nora is embarrassed by her mother's barely literate writing. The implication seems to be that illiteracy contributes to a lack of verbal communication and intimacy.

In Kent luxury and life explode around Nora. She now lives in a large, beautiful house that even has a room dedicated to eating. Prior to seeing it, Nora hadn't known that dining rooms exist. The description of Nora's first meal with the Rivers made my mouth water. Imagine growing up a poor girl eating bland, colorless food and then sitting down to this meal. Here's a taste:

"Ma and I ate plain food that was white or grey; bread and dripping, boiled potatoes and stew. The food that Mrs Rivers set down on the rectory table was bright like stained glass in a church window. The slices of meat that came way from Reverend Rivers' carving knife were as pink as a blush. Mrs. Rivers put two pieces on my plate, next to orange carrots, dark green spinach and roast potatoes the colour of gold, then she poured on gravy that settled in pools around it all. . . . The smell of the food rose up to my nose, thick and strong. I picked up my knife and fork and cut through one of the pieces of meat. I stabbed at it with my fork, added a potato and dipped it into the gravy. . . . I wanted to keep the taste of that first mouthful forever, holding the meat and potato on my tongue as the hot gravy ran down my throat. Swallowing seemed like a shame. But the mouthfuls that followed were just as good. I put iron-tasting spinach next to buttery carrots and softened the saltiness of the potatoes with gravy. I cut a slice of beef into little pieces and piled them all onto my fork, then filled my mouth as full as I could with meat, liking the resistance that it gave as I chewed" (41-42).

The house is beautiful, the food is delicious, the surrounding countryside is Nora's playground, and she and Grace become best friends, as close as beloved sisters. But as Nora grows up, she starts to notice that all is not well in the Rivers' home. Mrs Rivers retreats for hours everyday to play her piano. Reverend Rivers spends his days at the Rectory and his evenings in his study. They don't seem to have much to do with one another or with Grace. This family may be highly literate, but they too lack intimacy and live in isolation from each other. We find out why later in the book.

And then Nora starts to realize that she longs for more than just friendship with Grace.

When the girls are out in nature, Nora is in paradise. As they run into the lake and swim underwater, she says, "I felt utterly at peace. In this silent world I was calm, free of the shame that weaselled its way into my heart whenever I thought of her. I wished that I could stay in it forever" (139). But life moves on, or at least Grace does. Nora wants what she wants and does all she can to maintain her illusion that their paradise lost can be reclaimed. She seems to shrivel next to Grace, both physically and emotionally. She sinks further into desperation and isolation which causes her to take desperate action with irreversible consequences.

I can't discuss much more of the book without revealing the twists and turns of the plot, which is much of the pleasure of reading a book such as this. And it is in the unwinding of the plot that I can see the comparisons to Sarah Waters who is a master at plot twists--from small, subtle ones that build and eventually crest, pleasantly surprising you, to the colossal shifts that you don't see coming and that make you talk back to the book, saying intelligent things like, "no way!"

The intense feelings of love that Nora has for Grace made me think of Nan's feelings for Kitty in *Tipping the Velvet* (the book by Sarah Waters, the screenplay by Andrew Davies). The movie *Heavenly Creatures* also came to mind several times as I was reading due to the intensity of the relationship between the girls and their class differences as well. I won't be surprised if *Days of Grace* finds its way to the cinema.

Nora is a complicated character. She's a survivor. She struggles to break her silence. Every time she does something that I want to judge and condemn, I remember bits from her story that make me soften towards her. She was raised in poverty with very little education (until she got to Kent, anyway), sent away by her only parent to live with strangers, never had the security of a family that was open and honest about feelings, and lived in a time when acceptance of lesbian love was nonexistent. Nora reads Reverend Rivers' books in the hopes of finding a love that she can relate to, that will validate her feelings towards Grace, but, of course, she finds nothing. And then there are the laws and accompanying guilt of her religion that further isolate her due to her difference.

When reading historical fiction, I often feel a longing for the world the author has created. Not so in this case. Hall has created a world where the characters all seem to live lives of quiet desperation, isolated from one another by feelings and circumstances. I am glad to be where I am, in the time I am, with beautifully written books like *Days of Grace* to read and be challenged by. Its a book that encourages me to open up more to life, to take the risks to be vulnerable with those I love and to make new connections as well.

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### **Sara says**

First, this review isn't fair and is closer to a 3.5

About two thirds of the way through *Days of Grace*, I started laughing. This is likely because I chose the audiobook, and the long litany of tragic accidents, howling winds, and ominous pains would have been just

plain depressing had they not been read in a lugubrious, cracked voice that reminded me of the handwritten obituaries I got from my grandmother in college. This book has everything-- the blitz, repressed lesbian longings, terminal illnesses and pervy priests, and maybe it would have seemed subtler in print. Or maybe not. I'm probably not giving Hall a fair shake, and would still very much like to read a paper copy of *The Repercussions*.

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