



# **Asymmetry**

*Lisa Halliday*

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# Asymmetry

Lisa Halliday

**Asymmetry** Lisa Halliday  
**NATIONAL BESTSELLER**

**“Asymmetry is extraordinary. . . Halliday has written, somehow all at once, a transgressive roman a clef, a novel of ideas and a politically engaged work of metafiction.” —Alice Gregory, *The New York Times Book Review***

**“A brilliant and complex examination of power dynamics in love and war.” —Sam Sacks, *The Wall Street Journal***

**“A scorchingly intelligent first novel. . . Asymmetry will make you a better reader, a more active noticer. It hones your senses.” —Parul Seghal, *The New York Times***

A singularly inventive and unforgettable debut novel about love, luck, and the inextricability of life and art, from 2017 Whiting Award winner Lisa Halliday.

Told in three distinct and uniquely compelling sections, *Asymmetry* explores the imbalances that spark and sustain many of our most dramatic human relations: inequities in age, power, talent, wealth, fame, geography, and justice. The first section, “Folly,” tells the story of Alice, a young American editor, and her relationship with the famous and much older writer Ezra Blazer. A tender and exquisite account of an unexpected romance that takes place in New York during the early years of the Iraq War, “Folly” also suggests an aspiring novelist’s coming-of-age. By contrast, “Madness” is narrated by Amar, an Iraqi-American man who, on his way to visit his brother in Kurdistan, is detained by immigration officers and spends the last weekend of 2008 in a holding room in Heathrow. These two seemingly disparate stories gain resonance as their perspectives interact and overlap, with yet new implications for their relationship revealed in an unexpected coda.

A stunning debut from a rising literary star, *Asymmetry* is an urgent, important, and truly original work that will captivate any reader while also posing arresting questions about the very nature of fiction itself.

## Asymmetry Details

Date : Published February 6th 2018 by Simon & Schuster

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Author : Lisa Halliday

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# From Reader Review Asymmetry for online ebook

## Neil says

If I am honest, it took me a few pages to get properly into this book, but I am very glad I did because it develops into a fascinating book that is almost more enjoyable on reflection than it is during reading. I think I've spent almost as long pondering it as I spent reading it.

The book consists of two novellas followed by a coda. At first sight, the novellas are very different from one another. One tells the story of Alice who works for a New York publisher and wants to be a writer who meets the multi-award winning author Ezra Blazer. Despite decades between their ages, they begin an affair. The second novella switches from third person to first person and tells us the story of Amar who is travelling from the US to Iraq to visit his brother. On a planned stopover at London, he is held back and questioned by immigration officials. This story develops by mixing Amar's reaction to the questioning and flashbacks to his family life.

On the face of it, there aren't many obvious connections between these two stories.

The coda returns us to Ezra who is now not just a Pulitzer Prize winner, but also a Nobel laureate and is being interviewed for the renowned Desert Island Discs radio show. In the course of the interview, he says something that makes the reader stop and look back at the two novellas.

The greatest fun to be had with the book is to then spend an age wondering whether the connections you have made are the right ones. The book blurb makes it clear that the book is about the asymmetry (imbalances) found in many human relationships: *inequities in age, power, talent, wealth, fame, geography, and justice*. But the comment from Ezra in his interview suggests it is also about how story-telling (fiction) can help explore these imbalances. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that "*fiction reveals truth that reality obscures*" (if I had a book blog, I would call it Obscured By Reality, but someone has already grabbed that name!), and, I think, this book is partly about how it can do that.

I say "greatest fun", but that's just a personal view. I'm not suggesting that the book is poor in any way. I enjoyed both novellas. Perhaps the second was more my taste in style, but then the coda suggests that the differences in style may be deliberate, which, in turn, makes the first one more enjoyable on reflection.

The book will be published early in 2018 and it will be fascinating to discuss it with other readers when it is fully available. I'm not 100% convinced I've got the connections right, so I'm keen to explore that with other people.

My thanks to Granta Press for an advance copy sent via NetGalley.

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## Doug Bradshaw says

There are two virtually unrelated stories here. The first section is a realistic story of the affair an aging (single) well known author has with a much younger girl, Alice, who is an editor. In that the cute author actually dated Phillip Roth for a time, much of the story must have been based on that relationship. As an older male, I enjoyed their relationship and I know many successful older men attract young women for a lot

of different reasons. Alice takes care of Ezra in many ways and also seems to enjoy a physical relationship with him. The story is never sexually graphic, all done in good taste, and there's no doubt that there is a nice mutual affection.

And then, all of a sudden that story finishes up and we jump into the life of an American male raised primarily in the US but has citizenship in the US as well as Iraq with a lot of family still living in Iraq. Some of his story is interesting, the differences between the two cultures, the sad problems in Iraq, the fundamental ways a different cultural background can make decision making radically different. Some of the writing here is excellent. But it wasn't a very satisfying story to me and the two didn't tie together very well except on a 10,000 ft. level regarding the vicissitudes of life.

I am following the author because I think she is talented. This was a 3.5 read for me.

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### **Maxwell says**

I can already tell that this book just isn't going to be my thing so I'm calling it quits at page 43. I'm really trying to know when to give up and not spend my time reading books I might end up feeling unenthusiastic about.

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### **Andrew Smith says**

Three stories – well two really, one being told in two parts.

1. A young female editor has a sexual relationship with an eminent, ageing writer. We are told little of the woman other than that we directly observe. What we observe is that she seems rather naive and lonely and does little other than meet with the writer, receiving random (and sometimes slightly strange) gifts, and that she also has occasional interactions with an elderly woman who lives in a separate flat in her building. The relationship with the writer does seem to satisfy her even though he's prone to passing her off to others as anything but his lover. Their discussions are mainly about literature and baseball. The text is interspersed with extracts from various novels.

2. A young man is stranded at a London Airport whilst en route to meet up with his brother in Kurdistan. He has been picked out by officers from Passport Control and is asked questions about his background and his planned journey. We learn that he intended to stop in London for a couple of days to meet with another man before flying on to his final destination. The traveller is an economist and he holds both an American and an Iraqi passport. In flashback, we get to know more of his life in America and also of his time spend in Iraq.

3. The final section picks up the writer from story 1 again. Some years have passed and this time he's being interviewed for the BBC radio programme Desert Island Discs. In the course of the interview he makes a clumsy but overt pass at the programmes presenter.

The writing here is to be admired: it's clever, sad and sometimes funny – but always engaging. Story 2 is written in a very different style to the others, but all three sections grabbed me. We are told that the final story is the coda that unites the first two pieces, but this is far from obvious to me. In thinking back on the stories there are certainly some common themes – insecurity and death, for example – but the onus is very

much on the reader to draw these out from the text. When I came to the end I was temporarily at a loss: what had I just read and what did it all mean? In truth, I'm still not sure I've worked it out.

My thanks to Granta Publications and NetGalley for providing a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

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### **Peter Boyle says**

There has been quite an amount of hype about this novel in recent weeks. From the reviews I skimmed, I gathered that it contained two seemingly unrelated stories, and then a coda which would shed light on how they are linked and magically uncover hidden depths that the reader hadn't previously considered. Count me in, I thought, this sounds fascinating.

The first story, *Folly*, tells of Alice, a twenty-something editor for a New York book publisher. One day she is approached by Ezra, a much older world-renowned author. A romance blossoms and despite the age difference, they seem to make each other happy, bonding over a mutual love of baseball and music. Alice is an aspiring writer and Ezra delights in giving her literary advice and instructing her what to read. But his health is failing and as the relationship progresses, Alice finds that she is becoming more of a carer than a lover. I enjoyed this section, even moreso when I learned that Lisa Halliday herself was once a young editor who had a fling with Philip Roth.

The second part, *Madness*, revolves around Amar, an Iraqi-American. He is being detained in Heathrow on a journey to visit his older brother Sami in the Middle East. During his long wait for clearance, he reflects on the choices that have brought him to this point in his life, and he worries about the safety of Sami in such a volatile region. I must admit that I struggled to make it through this section. Not only was the complete change of character and circumstance jarring, I felt entirely uninvolved and couldn't bring myself to care about the fate of Amar. But the whole time I was trying (and failing) to connect it to the first story, which is part of the fun I guess.

Finally I came to the coda, and I was excited to discover the key to unlocking the novel's treasure. It takes the form of a Desert Island Discs interview with Ezra, the writer from earlier in the book. A lively and revealing discussion ensues, which becomes a bit uncomfortable as Ezra makes awkward overtures toward the married host. And then he mentions that (view spoiler) So that's the big reveal, and I have to say I was quite underwhelmed. And if I hadn't known to look out for it, I might have missed it entirely.

Kudos to Lisa Halliday for trying something different. She is undoubtedly a clever and astute writer, and I have to admire the audacity of attempting something like this in her debut novel. But it left me wondering about the point of it all. Is it a commentary on the purpose of fiction? Or is it just a bit too "meta" for its own good? All I know is that the much anticipated conclusion left me disappointed, and for that reason *Asymmetry* felt like less than the sum of its parts.

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### **Paul Fulcher says**

*For her part, Alice was starting to consider really rather seriously whether a former choirgirl from Massachusetts might be capable of conjuring the consciousness of a Muslim man.*

*“Great American Novel” = “doorstop of a book, usually pretentious, written by a man.”*

Lionel Shriver (Independent 2010)

I suspect, even in January, the oddest book I will read this year as I don't quite get what the author is achieving other than annoying her readers. It essentially consists of two – I sincerely hope deliberately – badly written pastiche novellas, with a final coda that hints at some deep literary links between them.

But it is a novel I suspect I may end up discussing more than any other, as the critics so far seem to have been infected by a classic case of emperor's new clothes, asserting the subtlety of the novel because the novel

The first novella takes the worst of the various attempts at the Great American Novel from the last decades ranging from Roth (particularly Roth) and Bellow through Lethem, De Lillo and Franzen, to recent awful efforts by Hill (<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>), Auster (<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>) and Lerner (<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>) and turns them into a combined sexually creepy, self-satisfied, baseball obsessed, tonally annoying narrative of an affair between the elderly Pulitzer Prize winning novelist, and elderly Ezra Blaze and the many-decades-younger publishing assistant and aspiring writer Alice.

Done as a half page Digested Read by John Crace in the Guardian this would have been a quite fun take-down but stretched over c140 pages it is excruciating to read.

And bizarrely it is actually part autobiographical - as a 20-something literary agent, Lisa Halliday did apparently have a romantic relationship with Philip Roth. (See: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/fiction-...>)

The second is very different in form and content but equally unappealing. It uses the framing device of an American-Iraqi citizen, en route between the two countries, detained in immigration in LHR, a device done much better elsewhere (Home Fire, most obviously), to present a completely didactic and uninformative account of his life and that of his family, part in the US part in Iraq, throughout the two Gulf Wars and their aftermath.

At one point we are introduced to his Uncle who one suspects would have written the sort of novel I would love to have read – Mattias Enard's wonderful Compass being an obvious and shining example. When you ask his Uncle an apparently simple question he responds:

*Aaaahhh, yes, now that is an excellent question, and there is an amazing story behind the answer. Following which you could expect a forty-five-minute disquisition that would begin directly related to your query but then spiral outward to include anecdotes and observations regarding many other intriguing if not entirely innocuous matters as well. Thus in our three hours switchbacking up Goizha we discussed Aristotle, Lamarck, Debussy, Zoroastrianism, Abu Ghraib, Hannah Arendt, and the asyet-unknown contingencies of de-Ba'athification, Hassan managing even with respect to the more sobering of these topics to display a certain philosophical resilience.*

Unfortunately what we instead get is hinted at in another exchange:

*This is because politics in imaginative work is like a shot in the middle of a concert. The noise is deafening but it imparts no energy. It doesn't harmonize with the sound of any other instrument.*

Again the intention seems to be to show how these sort of novels can be done badly – here by those with little real understanding of the situation about which they are writing.

The last section was at least mercifully brief.

In a highly fantastical twist, the Roth-stand-in author has been awarded the Nobel Prize 'for his exuberant ingenuity and exquisite powers of ventriloquism, which with irony and compassion evince the extraordinary heterogeneity of modern American life' – fortunately the Nobel Committee have rather better taste (<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>) at least under their previous secretary Horace Engdahl who told the Associated Press in 2008:

"The U.S. is too isolated, too insular. They don't translate enough and don't really participate in the big dialogue of literature. That ignorance is restraining."

The format here is a transcript of his appearance on Desert Island Discs and as he rambles on, demonstrates his cultural ignorance and arrogance and - again very creepingly in the era of #metoo - attempts to seduce Sue Lawley, he hints at connections between the stories.

For balance and reviews that got rather more out of the book than I did, see those from Gumble's Yard and Neil, although it is rather interesting to note one common thread in their comments:

"I enjoyed much more after I finished and reflected on it than when I was reading it"  
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

"A fascinating book that is almost more enjoyable on reflection than it is during reading".  
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

Perhaps I would get more on reflection on the novel, but to be frank I don't think it justifies the effort given I wasted enough of my time reading it. Indeed from the press reviews now appearing, critics seem to be desperately striving to see things that aren't there and praise the book's flaws as deliberate genius. E.g. this review (<http://www.full-stop.net/2018/02/15/r...>) contains the line:

if Amar's story feels just a bit off — too written and perhaps too well-written, his midair birth too melodramatic — we could understand that to be Alice's novelistic failing, not Halliday's, or we could understand it to be an intentional jab at the arbitrariness of what we accept as fiction in a world of outrageous facts and "facts."

Or in other words 'the 2nd story may be badly written but that is a clever meta-fictional artistic take on the difficulties of writing good fiction'.

Or from the Atlantic (<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertain...>

Halliday incorporates big chunks of quotation from these Great Books (Camus, Twain, Primo Levi), as if to suggest how their voices are usurping Alice's own.

Or perhaps, more simply, the author wants to pad out the book with some decent writing.

A novel I rather fear may reappear in award season given its artistic inclination and the collective madness that has befallen the newspaper critics, but if it does I would suggest interested readers simply sample a page of each of the first two parts, take on trust that they continue in that vein, and simply read the coda.

Thanks to the publisher and Netgalley for the ARC.



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

I know what I'm supposed to experience with this book, and it was this promise that forced me through to the end (I was stalled at 42% for a while, choosing to read other books):

"These two seemingly disparate stories gain resonance as their perspectives interact and overlap, with yet new implications for their relationship revealed in an unexpected coda."

There are two major stories, one with a young woman in an inexplicable relationship with an older writer. I've seen other reviews refer to it as tender and/or funny, but I found it to be rather cold and emotionless.

I liked the second story, about the Iraqi man stopped at the UK customs interrogation office (not its official name.) It is evenly told, through interviews and back story.

But this promised payoff of overlap and new implications in an unexpected coda? I would need someone to hold my head and point to where. I don't see it at all. The coda connected to the first story, sure, but....

I should say that this book may appeal to people who have been enjoying Ali Smith's season novels. I find them to have more heart, but the fragmented style is somewhat similar. I'm not sure this worked for me the way her novels do. I will say your mileage may vary, and that I did not care for it.

*Thanks to the publisher for providing early access to the title in exchange for an honest review. It comes out February 6, 2018.*

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### **Sarah Jessica Parker says**

I was so happy to get my hands on this book. Enjoyed and glad I read it.

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### **Angela M says**

There were things that I liked about this "novel" in three parts. In the first part, "Folly", I especially loved the literary references, the music, and I loved the baseball talk. Having lived in the Boston area I definitely understand the Red Sox - Yankees rivalry and we lived there in 2004 when they won the World Series. (Go Sox! They are still my favorite team and even though I have moved back home to New York State.) At first I thought the relationship between Alice and Ezra, the writer who is a lot older than she is, sort of endearing, but my view changed later. At the end of this part, I was left invested in these characters wanting to know what would happen to them, individually and together.

Amar, an Iraqi American held at Heathrow Airport is the center of the second story, "Madness", which I found was interesting and reflective of the immigrant experience and what it must have been like and certainly still is for those of Mid East descent post 9/11. While reading it, though I struggled to find connection with the first novella.

In the last part, Ezra Blazer's "Desert Island Discs", an interview with the writer of the first novella, we get a

hint, well more than a hint of how the first two parts might be connected. While I quite liked him in the first part, Ezra became for me a dirty old man with his reflection on his younger girlfriends as his children and as he tries to hit on the woman interviewing him

3 stars is all I can give it. I thought the book was written in a clever way and it's a lot about the form, commentary in a way on writing. It was just too clever for my liking . There are a number of highly rated reviews that might shed some light on further thematic connections that didn't stand out to me. I recommend reading those. In spite of my mixed feelings on this, I will still look to see what this author may write in the future.

This was another monthly read with my two of my book BFFs , Diane and Esil and as always fun to get their perspective as we read together.

I received an advanced copy of this book from Simons and Schuster through Edelweiss.

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### **Esil says**

3.5 stars, although my thoughts on this one are a bit asymmetrical.

It's a book of themes, with asymmetry as the centerpiece. It's broken into three parts of uneven length, tenuously connected to each other. The first part features an asymmetrical relationship between the narrator, a young woman named Mary Alice, and an aging famous writer. The second part is told from the perspective of an Iraqi American man, flitting back and forth in time and place, but always coming back to his detention in a UK airport. And the third part is very brief and in the form of a radio interview with the famous writer from the first part.

It's a book of many literary and musical references, with Alice in Wonderland as a clear centerpiece. Does Alice fall through the rabbit hole when she meets the famous author in Central Park? Is the middle section Alice's dream? Is the interview Alice waking up? Perhaps...

It's well written. It's tremendously suggestive. It's a bit creepy. It aims to shock a bit, but not too much. I loved it in parts, but at times I felt a bit too lost and disoriented – much as Alice...

As I write my review, I realize how clever Asymmetry is. But that doesn't detract from the fact that this was a mixed reading experience. I suspect that some will love it and some will hate it, and others like me will wake up feeling a bit disoriented, trying to figure out what just happened.

Thank you to Netgalley and the publisher for an opportunity to read an advance copy. And thank you to my lovely buddy readers, Angela and Diane -- I was certainly grateful to have both of you reading this one along with me.

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### **Diane S ? says**

3.5 I did not feel an emotional connection to this book, but I did find it intellectually stimulating. Something

very different, very original and elegantly conceived. Two novellas, which are written very differently, the first a famous author, an older man, already successful, his life near the end. A younger woman, Alice, in her late twenties, an editor, still trying to find herself, her life just beginning to unfold. They have an affair, and keep in mind the title, it is very fitting, their she's and life experiences do not match, but they both love baseball, though different teams, it is a common denominator in their relationship. Many quotes from different literary novels, fill these pages. Love and art.

The second novel takes a different turn, seems totally unrelated, though there are some common denominators. Alice and the looking glass, a mirror by which one sees oneself. But how do these connect? The third is an interview, the interviewee Ezra and it is here we find the connection, though one is never write sure if they are putting this together correctly. I liked the challenge of this. All sections are wonderfully written, the prose quite brilliantly conceived. Every once in a while I find it stimulating to read a book where one has to think, where everything is not apparent. That was this book.

Of course it helped immeasurably to read this with my two amazing reading buddies, Esil and Angela, though our rating varied somewhat with this one. It was nice to have others to bounce ideas and thoughts off of, see if we were all putting this together the same. I think that like Ali Smith, and her writing, this is challenging but worthwhile. The funny thing is that if sometimes I feel frustrated with these novels, not sure where they are going, I also find that these are the novels that linger, that provoke new thoughts, new meanings, even the day after one has finished.

ARC from Edelweiss.

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## **Elyse says**

Library Overdrive - spontaneous- 'available' download.

This is one of those books I had seen around - but couldn't remember reading anything about it. So- while out walking - with no reviews in front of me - I took it for a test run and liked the beginning right away., It started off with a BANG....( kinda creepy)...but totally addicting. I mean - would you like knowing your daughter was having an affair with an old Jewish geezer? Me either ....but it made for a good story - and Ezra ( old geezer/ author)- gave Alice yummy cookies - ice cream cones - told her Jewish jokes - and even money to buy herself a new air conditioning unit for her apt. Alice made him feel 'good' —like a young geezer.

Laughing- yet?

I couldn't help but think about Joyce Maynard and J D Salinger. ( hmmm- this story sounded like theirs).....haha!

So, as I was saying, The audiobook \*BEGINNING\* WAS GREAT....creepy - 'young girl with an old man affair', engaging story-GREAT!!

but then.....

I was lost... what was going on? Where did Alice go? What's going on?

Ohhhhh.....A NEW STORY. ( silly me).... it's a NEW story about a guy named Amar stuck at the London airport —we discover why- who - what - and the details about the son of an immigrant Iraqi Family - on his way to see his brother - and stories of his life in America and Iraq.

Then we have a third story which ties story 1 & 2 together....kinda? — Ezra ( old geezer/author) —is being interviewed about his love of music and women.

The writing - and dialogue stand out - and the AUDIOBOOK NARRATOR IS TERRIFIC.

It didn't all make sense to me - but I was intrigued - and enjoyed it for its creative asymmetry.

3.5 rounding up for creativity.....plus, much was very enjoyable!

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## **Kasa Cotugno says**

Lisa Halliday has created a work of stunning originality. Consisting of three distinct sections, *Asymmetry* presents more of a work of concept than either plot or character. The three plots have subtle connections that the reader sometimes has to work at discovering. The first, *Folly*, concerns the May/December romance of Alice, a young editor living in an upper west side apartment, and her relationship with Ezra Blazer, a much older, prominent author who guides her senses of self and taste. *Madness*, the center story, at first seeming to be totally unconnected, concerns Amar, an American born of Iraqi immigrants, a victim of racial profiling who finds his attempts to spend a lengthy layover in London stymied by NAS (think TSA in Britain). Amar's story is told in retrospect as he waits out the hours in a holding room in Heathrow. The two stories are separated by five years, but there is a tenuous connection between the two characters, so subtle, it could be missed entirely. In the final section, Ezra tells an interviewer what music he would choose to have with him should he become stranded on a desert isle, and embellishes his biography around his choices. Each of these elements could stand alone, the first two being the length of novellas, but together, they make for compelling, exciting reading

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## **Gumble's Yard says**

Update: one wonders if the death of Philip Roth will increase the chances of this book being listed for some literary prizes in the UK or US.

*Asymmetry* is the debut novel of Lisa Halliday. The book consists of two novellas and coda.

The first novella, set in the early 2000s tells the story of Alice – both the opening and closing of this novella, make it clear that the characters name is a very explicit nod to the Alice of Lewis Carroll. An aspiring writer, working at a publisher in New York she bumps into the famous, multiple Pulitzer Prize winning now elderly writer Ezra Blaze – and the two commence an unlikely (\*) affair which Alice herself admits could easily be seen as “a healthy young woman losing time with a decrepit old man”. This section is written very much in the great American novel style of an ageing male novelist, with for a non-US reader far too much baseball – but with interesting vignettes, laced with classic literary excerpts (Twain, Camus, Genet, Miller, Joyce, Dickens, Levi) with music-hall song lyrics and with the citations for the winners of the Nobel Prize for literature during the time period (2002-2004). The story finishes with Alice waiting for jury service and the increasingly frail Ezra in hospital.

The second novella is a distinct change of tone and character and even person (from third to first). Amar is a US based Iraqi-American dual national, in 2008 on his way to visit his brother who to their parent's dismay decided to live back in Iraq as a Doctor, he attempts to stop over in London and stay with war journalist friend. The story is set in an immigration holding room at Heathrow, and between questioning by immigration officials, Amar reflects back on his life and the different paths it could have taken, including the

hazardous life of his Iraqi based relatives (including his brother) and the increasing threat of kidnap and ransom demands.

The two stories at first only seem subtly and at most tangentially linked.

The coda is a recording of Desert Island Discs in 2011 – where the guest is a garrulous, now Nobel-laureate Ezra – he tells (or possibly embellishes) his life story while discussing his records, and attempting to seduce Sue Lawley – but one comment sheds a completely different light on the relationship between the two novellas and on the whole novel.

The novel itself then becomes one with a number of different but closely interrelated themes: inequalities or asymmetries (in age, wealth, fame, geography, nationality, official and legal status); the role of fiction in examining and exploring these asymmetries; how these inequalities drive and shape literary influences (particularly for a young author).

Overall this was a book that I enjoyed much more after I finished and reflected on it than when I was reading it – perhaps not least due to my complete lack of identification with the baseball references, or the bizarre relationship, in the first section. By contrast, the second section, where the author is clearly writing about cultures, peoples and circumstances of which she has no knowledge and where the narrator himself comments “It may perhaps be said – if anyone dared – that the most worthless literature of the world has been that which has been written by the men of one nation concerning the men of the other” – I found much more enjoyable and convincing. After reading the coda I realised that much of this may be completely deliberate and all part of the meta-fictional conceit.

Overall this is a book I would like to return to after its official publication – both to read interviews with the author and to discuss the book with other readers.

*.... a rather surprising little novel ..... about the extent to which we're able to penetrate the looking-glass and imagine a life, indeed a consciousness, that goes some way to reduce the blind spots in our own ..... a kind of veiled portrait of someone determined to transcend her provenance, her privilege, her naiveté.*

My thanks to Granta Press for an ARC via NetGalley.

(\*) Thanks to the New York Times for pointing out that this affair is at least partly biographical - based, at least in part, on a real relationship between the author and Philip Roth some 15-20 years ago. I have to say I had assumed/hoped that there was elements in the first and third sections which deliberately a pastiche of a certain type of great American novel/elderly American male novelist ..... I now worry it was more of a tribute.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/02/bo...>

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**Larry H says**

I'm between 3 and 3.5 stars.

How do you judge a book—do you just consider whether or not you liked it, or do you also take into consideration whether or not the author's attempt at conveying a message worked for you? This dilemma arose for me after reading Lisa Halliday's debut novel, *Asymmetry*.

The book is unevenly divided into three novellas. I loved the first one, enjoyed parts of the second one, and really didn't understand the purpose of the third one. Since the third novella portrayed a character from the first novella in a rather unflattering (although not unsurprising) light, I didn't enjoy it at all, and kept waiting for something more to happen.

While it appeared that the first two novellas are completely unrelated, apparently the third novella sheds some light on the characters in the first two, or at least deepens their meaning. I'm not ashamed to say I didn't see that, and honestly, I'm not a fan of having to read something so closely as if to search for hidden meaning. But unfortunately, it dampened my overall enthusiasm for the book, despite it being well written.

"Folly," my favorite, is the story of Alice, a young editor living in New York City shortly after 9/11. She is having an affair with the famed writer Ezra Blazer, a legendary author who is significantly older than she is. Their relationship occurs in fits and starts, as Blazer does everything he can to ensure Alice doesn't become too attached, and in a small way, ensure he doesn't become too dependent on her. As the novella explores Alice's life both with and without Blazer, it also explores the writing process, and how what we read has an influence on what we write, and how we see.

"Madness" follows Amar, an Iraqi-American man who is detained at Heathrow while on the way to visit his brother in Kurdistan. The novella juxtaposes his interrogation, as he tries to make sense of why he is being detained beyond his heritage, and his experiences the last time he and his family visited Iraq. It also provided commentary on identity, ambition, relationships, and the fraught environment of post-Saddam Iraq.

In the third, and shortest, novella, "Ezra Blazer's Desert Island Discs," Blazer returns to appear on the famed BBC radio program and shares his thoughts on which music he'd most want to have with him if stranded. Beyond a list of musical acts and their significance, Blazer shares some memories from his life which provide more insight into his character—and he flirts shamelessly with the program's host.

I believe Halliday really has some talent as a writer. There were a number of times I marveled at her language and imagery. I loved Alice's character in particular, and was fascinated by her relationship with Blazer. I'll admit that I felt a little gypped when her story ended and Amar's began. Amar's story was uneven—I definitely found the scenes with him being interrogated far more compelling than the rest of his rather disaffected life.

While this was an intriguing read, as I mentioned, I didn't see the thread that connected the novellas, so the book as a whole didn't work for me. This could work for others, however—I know a few people who thought it's one of the best books written thus far in 2018. Regardless of where you end up, Halliday is a talent worth watching.

See all of my reviews at [itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blogspot.com](https://itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blogspot.com), or check out my list of the best books I read in 2017 at <https://itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blogspot.com/2018/01/the-best-books-i-read-in-2017.html>.

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