PDF | Under the Wide and Starry Sky: A Novel

by Nancy Horan
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • TODAY SHOW BOOK CLUB PICK • NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY THE WASHINGTON POST AND ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Look for special features inside. Join the Random House Reader’s Circle for author chats and more.


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Fanny does not immediately take to the slender young lawyer who longs to devote his life to writing—and who would eventually pen such classics as Treasure Island and The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde In time, though, she succumbs to Stevenson’s charms, and the two begin a fierce love affair—marked by intense joy and harrowing darkness—that spans the decades and the globe. The shared life of these two strong-willed individuals unfolds into an
adventure as impassioned and unpredictable as any of Stevenson’s own unforgettable tales.

**Praise for Under the Wide and Starry Sky**

“A richly imagined [novel] of love, laughter, pain and sacrifice . . . Under the Wide and Starry Sky is a dual portrait, with Louis and Fanny sharing the limelight in the best spirit of teamwork—a romantic partnership.”—**USA Today**

“Powerful . . . flawless . . . a perfect example of what a man and a woman will do for love, and what they can accomplish when it’s meant to be.”—**Fort Worth Star-Telegram**

“Spectacular . . . an exhilarating epic about a free-spirited couple who traveled the world yet found home only in one another.”—**Booklist** *(starred review)*

“Horan’s prose is gorgeous enough to keep a reader transfixed, even if the story itself weren’t so compelling. I kept re-reading passages just to savor the exquisite wordplay. . . . Few writers are as masterful as she is at blending carefully researched history with the novelist’s art.”—**The Dallas Morning News**

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“Nancy Horan has done it again, capturing the entwined lives of Fanny Osbourne and Robert Louis Stevenson so uncannily, it reads like truth.”—Sarah Blake, author of **The Postmistress**

“Horan has a distinct knack for evoking the rich, complicated lives of long-gone artists and the women who inspired them.”—**Entertainment Weekly**

*From the Trade Paperback edition.*

**Amazon.com Review**

**Q&A with Author Nancy Horan**
How did Fanny and Louis shape each other’s artistic lives and accomplishments? Has researching and writing *Under the Wide and Starry Sky* changed your view of such classics as *Treasure Island*? *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*?

Fanny married Louis when he was a relatively unknown travel writer and essayist who was not yet able to support himself with his writing. He began writing novels after he was married to her. He trusted her critical opinions of his work, calling her his “critic on the hearth.” Some biographers believe she meddled too much in his work, yet Stevenson continued the practice of seeking his wife’s opinion for many years. Robert Louis Stevenson was a towering literary figure in the 19th century. Possibly Fanny’s greatest contribution to his achievements (aside from the devoted attentions kept him alive despite his terrible ill health).

Simply rereading *Treasure Island* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* has made me appreciate him much more. The two books are very different. *Treasure Island*, which was serialized in *Young Folks* magazine when it first appeared, was viewed as a boy’s adventure story, and Stevenson got the reputation of being a children’s author after it was published. I think that reputation fell away with *Jekyll and Hyde*, which is dark, dark, dark. It is an allegory that strikes a chilling chord in most readers. Interestingly enough, most people today haven’t read it. Yet during the writing of my book, I was struck by how often the names Jekyll and Hyde appear in print, or are spoken in
conversation. Even if the story is not read much today, people understand the theme of it quite well: that in most of us, a duality exists. We contain within ourselves the potential for both good and evil.

Did Stevenson shape Fanny’s literary accomplishments? In some ways, yes. She had written magazine pieces before meeting him, though she’d only published one before their marriage. Later, she wrote several short stories that made it into print. Publication of her stories may have occurred because of Stevenson’s influence with editors. Fanny and Louis collaborated on one collection of linked stories, entitled The Dynamiter, and a play called The Hanging Judge. Nevertheless, I believe Fanny felt frustrated living in the shadow of so popular a figure as her husband. She longed to be appreciated for something more than her value as his helpmeet.

What were some of the obstacles the Stevensons faced, and how did Fanny and Louis help each other navigate them? What made their relationship endure?

The greatest obstacle was Louis’s ill health. He suffered from a serious lung ailment that was thought to be tuberculosis, though some contemporary writers question that diagnosis and suggest that it may have been bronchiectasis. Treatment options for serious lung conditions were limited in the 19th century, and usually involved a change of climate. The Stevensons’ life together became a quest to find a climate that would allow Louis to get out of bed and regain strength and mobility. They lived in the Swiss Alps, the south of France, and Saranac, New York at the urging of Louis’s various doctors. Fanny performed any number of heroic feats to keep him alive, and to get him to safe places where he stood a chance of living longer.

For his part, Louis provided the emotional support Fanny needed to get through a difficult divorce; he also provided the artistic lifestyle she craved, reliability, and through his prolific writing, the financial security she would need if he died. The promise of security was not evident when she married him, though. He was near penniless at the beginning. What he offered her at that time was his gentle, hilarious, brilliant, devoted self. Why did their relationship endure? Certainly it was complicated and often thorny; different individuals might not have stayed the challenging course they faced. But for all their flaws and eccentricities, they loved each other and derived great pleasure from the other’s company. Stevenson was able to say, well along in his relationship with her, that marrying Fanny was the smartest thing he ever did.

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