

## **Book Review – The Snow and the Works on the Northern Line by Ruth Thomas**

**‘It is a grave mistake to think there is more significance in great things than in little things.’  
(Joanna Trollope, Desert Island Discs 1984)**

**In Edinburgh-based author Ruth Thomas’s *The Snow and the Works on the Northern Line*, Sybil Wiseman’s life is going along more or less fine.**

**She has a new if lowly job at the Royal Institute of Prehistorical Studies in Greenwich, and a live-in boyfriend, Simon, who’s a chef and obsessive foodie. At least she gets to eat well – and she also adores**

# Simon.

*It was pretty much love at first sight; I suppose it was what is called a coup de foudre.*



As the book opens, Sybil has just had an accident at the Streatham Ice Rink (one of the many places that Simon wanted to go more than she did...) but the head injury she suffered appears to be healing well.

Then back into Sybil's life walks beautiful, ambitious, Helen Hansen. The face that launched a thousand ships. The woman who, as one of Sybil's old university tutors, had tried (though she was overruled) to mark Sybil's Finals dissertation down. She is now 'heading up' the London Museums' Interpretation Centre, an organisation created to link academic organisations (especially financially challenged ones like the Institute) with commercial funding, ie to generate some income for these cash-strapped places by producing 'merchandise' and turning half their floor space into gift shops. On top of that she's produced some ground-breaking new research about the Beaker People (coincidentally – or is it? – the subject of Sybil's own dissertation). She's even going to do a TED talk.

Helen is smooth, cool and dangerous. In fact she is everything that Sybil isn't.

Within a very short time she has inveigled her way onto the Institute's board and been elected chair of their trustees. And within an even shorter time she has stolen Simon from Sybil. She even calls Sybil to tell her;

*'poor Simon is in such torment, he's really quite torn because he cares so much about you Sybil...it's just that he hasn't known quite how to tell you himself..'*

In other words, Simon is a lily-livered coward. But Sybil is devastated.

From then on, Sybil's life starts to unravel. She is consumed by grief and hatred. But as time goes by, she is even more consumed with the desire for revenge. How she eventually gets this, and struggles back from the underworld of misery to the light of understanding, the 'sweet air of heaven', forms the plot of this exceptional novel.

One of the things Sybil does – reluctantly, and on the advice of a colleague – is to join a poetry class at Brixton library. In an attempt to write haikus, she starts to link random words together, and these often give us insight into her all-consuming misery;

*I hate and I love/Like Catullus/But mainly these days/I just hate you Helen*

The poetry group is just one example of Ruth Thomas's outstanding skill at capturing the everyday, the little things that people do. It's made up of oddballs who hope this is a way to get the attention life otherwise denies them, like Olivia Barnes Graeme, who reads out her entire collection on 'using household objects as metaphors';

*'Next, a poem about a rolling pin though to be frank I got a bit stuck with this one Fleur, I think I was running out of steam at this point...'*

But much as Sybil tries – and her poetic efforts continue throughout most of the book – everything comes back to her betrayal; she simply cannot let it go.

As Sybil stumbles through winter in London, Thomas brings us one brilliant scene after another. Sybil's weekend at her parents' house in Norfolk is a miniature masterpiece; her mother's attempts to give her advice about Helen and Simon,

her father's terrible jokes, his obsession with the dog hairs in his car – from a dog that isn't even his own;

*My parents' lives seemed hugely complicated these days, with incidents and crises that I was no longer a part of. Even with other people's incidents and crises.*

Who hasn't felt this sense of dislocation on visiting retired parents? On the one hand you feel excluded from their day to day lives, and on the other you are grateful to be excluded, because you can't imagine being so old as to be bothered with all the things that seem to take up their time.

Similarly, Thomas's depiction of the characters who work at the Institute is spot on. The unworldly academics, who nevertheless all want their own way and are determined to have it, Mr Won, the volunteer who just keeps quietly 'considering these pieces of rock', the long serving staff who've been tucked away in a top floor room or basement for decades.

The Institute's director Raglan Beveridge is a particularly layered and interesting character. Raglan is a gentle, vague man who is himself harbouring a grief as great as Helen's but with no hate figure to blame it on, and even less ability to express his feelings. On many occasions he and Sybil almost – but not quite – manage to communicate. His sadness is palpable.

While *The Snow and the Works on the Northern Line* is an exploration of many kinds of misery and loneliness, it is important to say that it is often also extremely funny. I very rarely laugh out loud at a book, but I did at this one. Sybil's horribly bouncy new flatmate Esther, with her tactless invitations and blackly hilarious descriptions of her energetic love life, reminded me of quite a few people.

There is so much more to say about this quiet, subtle novel. Ruth Thomas has such a keen eye for the idiosyncrasies and

absurdities of the daily round, but she also digs deeper to give us a real understanding of what is happening, both to Sybil and to some of the people around her.

At the end of *The Snow and the Works on the Northern Line* there is resolution of sorts. This is not a romance, there is no trite happy ever after, but the revenge that Sybil finally exacts on the duplicitous Dr Hansen will be appreciated by anyone who has ever felt sidelined and powerless. It is an absolute triumph, as is this wonderful book.

*The Snow and the Works on the Northern Line* by Ruth Thomas is published by Inverness-based [Sandstone Press](#)

