



BOOKS

RECOMMENDED

MY DARK VANESSA
KATE ELIZABETH RUSSELL
BY LAUREN CRISP

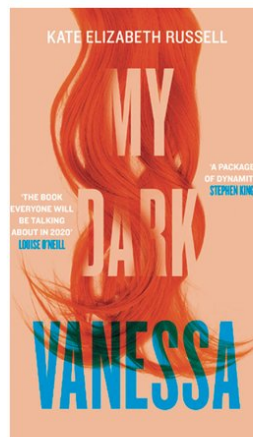
Kate Elizabeth Russell's much-hyped debut novel, hailed as Lolita for the #MeToo generation, is narrated entirely by the titular Vanessa and captivatingly crafted in two parallel timelines.

In 2000, Vanessa is a 15-year-old student at a Maine boarding school, when she begins a relationship with her English literature teacher, Jacob Strane, thirty years her senior. It is a relationship that taints her life until we meet her again in 2017, framed by the emergence of the burgeoning #MeToo movement, when she is forced to reassess the true nature of the relationship, and in turn, to redefine herself.

Whilst the timing of publication is apt, this novel is broader, bolder and more nuanced than its lucrative timing might suggest.

Indeed, Russell spent almost twenty years researching and developing the manuscript, an earlier form of which provided the basis of her PhD. My Dark Vanessa is no literary work of art, yet its plot is gripping, intricate and exacting in its portrayal of a relationship that, though horrifying, is also a love story for Vanessa. It's a superb portrayal of the subtle complexities of grooming, coercion, trauma and victimhood, and the blurred edges of consent and abuse.

Vanessa's narrative is intensely personal, yet she is frustrating, cold



and not particularly likeable, which perhaps emphasises the complexity of the scenario, and the consequences of her abuse.

Teenage Vanessa considers this to be her first love story and believes herself seductress, initiator, and willing participant. Almost two decades years later, her character has trouble convincing herself otherwise; after years of manipulation, she still has trouble regarding herself as a victim.

It makes for uncomfortable reading; Russell does not shy away from depictions of sexual abuse and rape. Such excruciating explicitness is certainly disturbing, yet in these scenes emanate a palpable sense of indignity, highlighting the subtleties and fine lines around consent; how Vanessa can

simultaneously feel longing and disgust; a desire to please, and an instinct for shame.

Strane seduces Vanessa with books and compares her to the redheads of famous literature. The novel's title is taken from a line in Nabokov's Pale Fire, which Strane reads to Vanessa ("Come and be worshipped [...] My dark Vanessa"), using this, along with other means, to persuade her that she, too, is dark, and bad, an idea that she carries into adulthood. Later, when Strane gives Vanessa his own well-thumbed copy of Nabokov's Lolita, she becomes obsessed, and her life begins to blur between reality and fiction; Lolita's forbidden romance becomes, for Vanessa, something exciting, and the perfect form of self-denial and defence.

This literary framing, however, feels overplayed and self-conscious. Russell is clearly in awe of Nabokov, and My Dark Vanessa often reads like a revisionist Lolita told from the perspective of abused rather than abuser. The whole idea feels obsessive and overworked, undermining believability. It also means you'll get far less out of this novel if you haven't read Lolita.

A problem just as fundamental is that, despite this reliance on literary precedents, Russell's prose isn't anything special, with her attempts at flowery descriptions in particular feeling trite.

There is no denying, however, that this is a gripping page-turner. It's hard hitting and sad. Vanessa's lack of any sense of self beyond the affair and its dire consequences on all subsequent aspects of her life are devastating. Regardless of whether My Dark Vanessa is framed by real-life high-publicity movements, or by literary precedents of illicit liaisons, Russell has written a brutal and brave debut.

BOXSETS

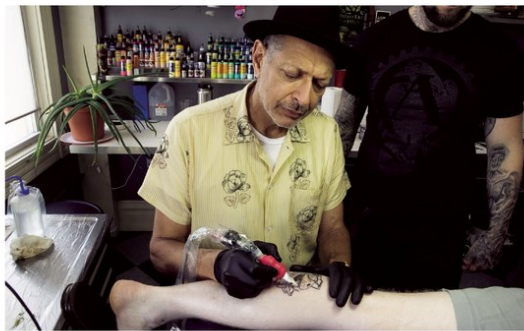
RECOMMENDED

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO JEFF GOLDBLUM | DISNEY+ (1 SEASON)
BY JAMES LUXFORD

Like Christopher Walken and William Shatner before him, Jeff Goldblum has achieved cult status, fondly celebrated for his eccentricities. This second wave of fame has seen him align with Disney+ for his new series, which is every bit as mad as you might expect.

The World According To Jeff Goldblum is a documentary show where the gangly Jurassic Park star inspects certain industries and subcultures through his own unique perspective. He visits sneaker aficionados, chats with make up artists, and has a hectic conversation with ice cream gurus Ben and Jerry (perhaps the only men more unusual than he is).

What this boils down to is a symphony of Goldblumian ticks, the star muttering "Hmm-Ahhh" and "yes-yes-yes" like a bemused royal asking regular people what they do for a living. Given the format isn't that different from most 'how is it made' documentary shows, Jeff's wackiness is the selling point. In one episode he asks a tattoo artist to frolic with him in a field, while in another he shouts "Squid Attack!" over and over to a navy chef too confused to question



the situation.

There's a joyfulness to this journey. He is, to his own admission, always on the lookout for the unexpected, forever analysing why we find contentment in life's little luxuries. His conventions are interesting, but we stick around for the charisma. Far from an affectation, Goldblum seems genuinely enthralled by life, and that energy is infectious. Whether barbecuing in the forest with hillbillies or singing show tunes with LGBTQ line dancers, he leaves everyone he encounters smiling. His meeting with an equally excitable denim dealer nicknamed Indiana Jeans is something to behold. The only time he dips slightly below 'absolutely thrilled' is an episode where he explores the world of competitive gaming, which clearly mystifies him. Even then, it's

not long before he's back to his old self, diving head first into a medieval role play event.

Streaming services are clogged with celebrity-driven projects - see also: The Chef Show or The Goop Lab - which are more about vanity than entertainment. The World According To Jeff Goldblum is different, offering a view on life that's great fun and only serves to further endear you to its star.

HUNTERS
AMAZON PRIME (1 SEASON)
BY HELEN CRANE

If you're looking for a nice, cuddly box set that you can watch half-comatose under your anxiety blanket as the world unravels around you, Amazon Prime's latest big-budget series Hunters probably isn't for you.



It's about Nazis, for one thing, and someone gets shot in the head approximately every three minutes. Set predominantly in 1977 New York, it follows a group of vigilantes who are on the hunt for Nazis who escaped justice after World War Two, and are hiding in plain sight as they plot to bring about the Fourth Reich. As the group pick off their individual targets, a wider plot is revealed which puts the whole city in danger.

Al Pacino puts in an unexpected turn as the deceptively kindly Jewish patriarch at the head of the Nazi-hunting operation, but he doesn't outshine the relative unknowns taking on the other leading roles.

This is a true ensemble cast, and part of the fun is unravelling the backstories and motivations of each member of the rag-tag crew - not all

of whom are Jewish - as the series moves along.

Flashbacks to Auschwitz and Buchenwald provide the stark emotional backdrop to the action scenes, reminding us that this might be bad-ass arse-kicking, but it's bad-ass arse-kicking for the good of humanity.

It's also peppered with surreal, comedy vignettes where the characters re-enact a retro commercial or dance to a disco track for a couple of minutes, some of which are a little awkward, but you have to fill the time between people getting shot in the head somehow.

It's not exactly one for the ages, but you'll be gripped by the end of the first episode and the ten hour-long installments will keep you occupied for many a lonely lockdown eve. Well, at least two.