

Washington Post – Review of Putney
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‘Putney’ is the perfect book club pick for the #MeToo moment

Thought-provoking and relevant, Sofka Zinovieff’s new novel “Putney” will provide plenty of book groups with fodder for discussions about female sexuality, child molestation, friendship and the #MeToo movement.

The story is a nuanced portrayal of the relationship between a 30-year-old man and a 13-year-old girl, but it’s less “Lolita” than an homage to “The Constant Nymph,” that 1920s bohemian novel of underage love and jealousy — at least at first. That’s when you may still have some sympathy for Ralph Boyd; the music composer enters the orbit of the Greenslay family when paterfamilias and writer Edmund hires Ralph to supply the score for a stage version of his best-known novel.

The Greenslay household resembles so many we’ve read about from the 1970s: chaotic, cluttered and freewheeling. A scene speaks of “unhurried pleasures: bottles of red wine, coffee cups, ashtrays, orange peel, the remains of a circle of Brie in its balsawood box.” Other pleasures are allowed, too — both Edmund and his wife, Ellie (Eleftheria; her Greek heritage is important later), take lovers as they like, their children running feral through their backyard in London’s Putney district.

Zinovieff cleverly shows Ralph meeting Daphne through his perspective. We see her puckish charm. “He was overwhelmed by this girl. But it was certainly not something sleazy or sinister. I didn’t want to do something to her, he thought. She inspired me.”

Even as you think, “Yeah, right,” the attraction between Ralph and Daphne seems natural and somehow fated in the weird walled garden governed by her family’s outré rules. But as in other gardens, this one has a snake — Daphne’s awkward best friend, Jane, always jealous of the attention Daphne receives from Ralph. Alternating between the perspectives of Ralph, Daphne and Jane, the book balances the voices of the three characters and their competing recollections of events. As the novel moves to the present day, we find Ralph in his 60s, riddled with cancer and cared for by his patient wife, Nina. Daphne, meanwhile, re-connects with Jane, who urges her old pal to press charges against the man who took advantage of her.

Jane’s actions will affect everyone involved, most dramatically on a return to Daphne’s family home in Greece. As readers slowly learn why Jane concerns herself so much with an affair that took place 30 years in the past, the novel exposes the many paradoxes of how Western society views sex and how complicated it can be to unpick right and wrong from memories. “Putney” may not ultimately offer justice, but it does offer closure, which for some victims may be just as cathartic.

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