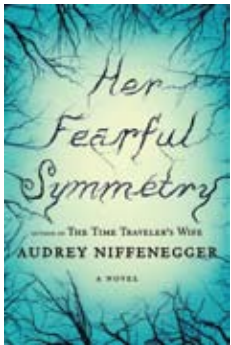


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Her Fearful Symmetry by Audrey Niffenegger

Book Review by Susann Cokal • Published September 25, 2009

In the second half of the 19th century, Londoners enjoyed a form of recreation that today might seem grisly: a Sunday stroll through one of the vast graveyards beyond the city center. The new burial grounds were established to move corpses out of the metropolitan churchyards, where they had contaminated the groundwater; these cemeteries were at once gardens, social centers and museums of statuary, a sort of theme park bristling with monuments to lost loves and individual hubris. They ultimately bore the same message one might hear in church: No matter how we try, our human endeavors end in death. It was not uncommon to find a family picnicking among the headstones. Highgate Cemetery, which opened in 1839, is perhaps the most famous of these parklands and a popular tourist attraction now. It is home to the remains of Karl Marx, Radclyffe Hall, Michael Faraday and the Pre-Raphaelite model Elizabeth Siddal Rossetti, among many other luminaries. It represents lives, secrets and stories jumbled together, the path through them determined by proximity and the tastes of the individual tour guide. In that way, it is like a novel.



HER FEARFUL SYMMETRY
by Audrey Niffenegger
Illustrated. 406 pp.
Scribner.

Audrey Niffenegger makes the most of Highgate in a bewitching new novel, *Her Fearful Symmetry*, which proves that death (as one currently popular saying goes) is only the beginning. That's true for Elspeth Noblin, who dies of cancer at age 44 after declaring: "A bad thing about dying is that I've started to feel as though I'm being erased. Another bad thing is that I won't get to find out what happens next." A lot happens next, and a very unerased

Elspeth participates in much of it, for there is a ghostly and passionate life after death: conflicts, like spirits, live on. Buried in Highgate, just over the fence from her former apartment, Elspeth's corporeal self has left behind an estranged twin sister, a younger lover whom she promises to haunt and a valuable estate that now belongs to her nieces, also twins, living in America. She stipulated that they can collect only if they move into her flat for a year and keep their parents out. Her reasons will be explained if Elspeth's lover, Robert – a neighbor and Ph.D. student writing an obsessive history of Highgate – can bear to read the diaries she's left him.

Obsession is the order of the day. Niffenegger digs deep into various forms of love, including the oppressive closeness between both pairs of twins and the beyond-the-grave ardor of Elspeth and Robert. There's also the outright obsessive-compulsive disorder that confines another likable neighbor, Martin, to his apartment. Martin's otherwise loving wife leaves him because of his physical rituals and emotional tics, the hoards of boxed-up belongings and the bleach-chapped hands that are figures for any kind of drive that takes over body and soul. Robert's obsession with Highgate means he has "lost all perspective" and let his thesis grow to more than 1,400 pages. In her own career, Niffenegger has written roughly as many pages that prove she is a daring, inventive and immensely appealing writer. Her runaway first book, *The Time Traveler's Wife*, is the story of two Chronos-crossed lovers whose meetings and partings are beyond their control; her illustrated novels, *The Three Incestuous Sisters* and *The Adventuress*, mix equal parts fairy tale and gothic romance. Each of these is a high-concept tour de force, with the flashiness that the term implies; each one is also an incantation to primal desires and horrors. In the present case, is anything more alluring than twins or more cathectic than a ghost?

Death comes with its own set of rules. Elspeth's spirit is unable to leave her old apartment, so she hides in a desk drawer and gains strength by teaching herself how to haunt. Eventually she will write in dust and manipulate a Ouija board, assuming the appearance

of "the body she had died in, thin and scarred by needle holes." She is not one to let the physical defeat her, even when her preternaturally gorgeous American nieces (who resemble a young Elspeth and her own twin) move in and slowly befriend a bewildered and grieving Robert. The description of those nieces, Julia and Valentina, might fit a pair of funerary statues: short, thin and pale, with white-blond hair and a tendency to hold each other's hands. They mirror each other even inside, where Valentina's heart sits on the right rather than the left and symmetry causes her a number of life-threatening health problems. Valentina is known as the nicer sister; perhaps inevitably, Robert finds himself falling for her, as she does for him. He is then in the awkward position of loving two women – one a living virgin, the other a phantom with an agenda. When Robert says of Elspeth's ghost, "her ideas have other ideas hiding inside them," it is an ominous observation, especially as Valentina enlists her help to break away from Julia.

Niffenegger's characters are selfish, messy, vulnerable and sometimes crazed, all under the attractive veneer of artistic and contemplative impulses. They don't live up to what others might consider their potential. Valentina wants to be a fashion designer but allows Julia's lack of ambition and general bossiness to keep her in a kind of perpetual adolescence. Martin is brilliant at languages, but his O.C.D.-imposed confinement means he translates digitally submitted texts and constructs elaborate crossword puzzles destined to die along with the daily paper. Even the most self-absorbed characters win a deep compassion; it's possible to root for every one, even as you want to shake some sense into them all. When he thinks of his wife, Martin misses her "roundness, he loved the warmth and heft and curve of her"; he even misses her snoring. Prickly Julia has her moments of kindness as she tries to help Martin. In part because of this emotional generosity, the novel is intimately and subtly humorous, as lovers banter and the narrative voice winks at human frailty. Put on a plummy British accent to pronounce "symmetry" and "cemetery" and discover a pun in the title.

The ending depends on some unsettling authorial choices. With two sets of twins and the supernatural in play, there are sure to be buried secrets and cases of mistaken identity. Although there are plenty of hints along the way, it may be helpful to draw a chart to track the inevitable reversals. Valentina's plan for escape is fantastical, its execution shocking – all to the author's credit. *Symmetry* rises above concept and into the heady air of artistry, where just about anything is believable. When Robert began his thesis, he envisioned Highgate as "a prism through which he could view Victorian society at its most sensationally, splendidly, irrationally excessive... a theater of mourning, a stage set of eternal repose." In this novel, it is much more than that, a place where the symmetry of a prism yields to the natural and emotional forces that distort the careful plans of cemetery designers and, by extension, anyone who dares to feel. The growth of tree roots raises a gravestone off the ground; a jealous prank changes life (and death) for two generations of twins. Repose is overrated anyway.

Lovers of Niffenegger's past work should rejoice. This outing may not be as blindly romantic as *The Time Traveler's Wife*, but it is mature, complex and convincing – a dreamy yet visceral tale of loves both familial and erotic, a search for Self in the midst of obsession with an Other. *Her Fearful Symmetry* is as atmospheric and beguiling as a walk through Highgate itself.

Susann Cokal, the author of the novels *Mirabilis* and *Breath and Bones*, is a frequent contributor to the Book Review.

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