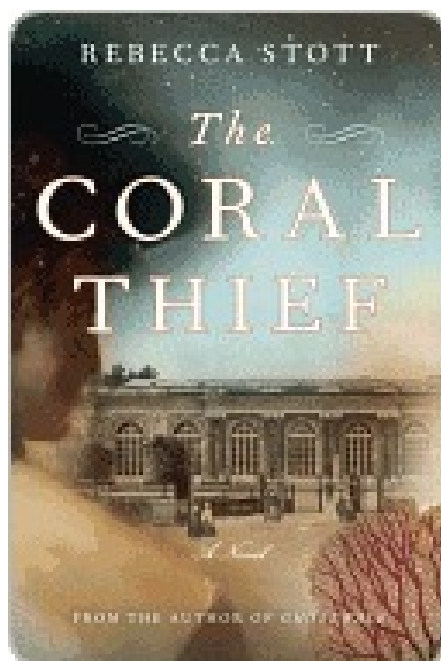




The Coral Thief

Rebecca Stott

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The Coral Thief Rebecca Stott

Paris, 1815. Napoleon has just surrendered at Waterloo and is on his way to the island of St. Helena to begin his exile. Meanwhile, Daniel Connor, a young medical student from Edinburgh, has just arrived in Paris to study anatomy at the Jardin des Plantes—only to realize that his letters of introduction and a gift of precious coral specimens, on which his tenure with the legendary Dr. Cuvier depends, have been stolen by the beautiful woman with whom he shared a stagecoach.

In the fervor and tumult of post revolutionary Paris, nothing is quite as it seems. In trying to recover his lost valuables, Daniel discovers that his beautiful adversary is in fact a philosopher-thief who lives in a shadowy world of outlaws and émigrés. Daniel's fall into this underworld is also a flight, for as he falls in love with the mysterious coral thief and she draws him into an audacious plot that will leave him with a future very different from the one he has envisioned for himself, Daniel discovers a radical theory of evolution and mutability that irrevocably changes his conception of the world in which he lives.

The Coral Thief, as riveting and beautifully rendered as Ghostwalk, Rebecca Stott's first novel, is a provocative and tantalizing mix of history, philosophy, and suspense. It conjures up vividly both the feats of Napoleon and the accomplishments of those working without fame or glory to change our ideas of who we are and the world in which we live.

The Coral Thief Details

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From Reader Review The Coral Thief for online ebook

Katri says

To me, *The Coral Thief* promised more than it delivered. The premise is exciting: a young Englishman, Daniel Connor, wants above all to be a scientist and travels to Paris to join the exciting realms of scientific research and thought still blossoming in post-Napoleon Paris in summer 1815. But his life takes a new turn when his precious fossils and manuscript trusted into his care disappear with a mysterious woman on his way to Paris. When tracking the woman and his belongings, Daniel ends up in a world of philosopher-thieves, radical scientific thought, and romance.

I love historical fiction and am fascinated by the history of science and 19th century Paris, and the story seemed original and started out interestingly. Alas, it didn't live up to my expectations. What I loved the most was all the stuff about history of science, and how the early 19th century Paris came alive. The descriptions of revolutionary violence in France were also vividly impressive. Sadly, otherwise the execution of the story was lacking.

The biggest problem for me was the characters. Daniel seemed promising at first, but ends up being a very dull character with no personality and certainly not enough to say to justify his 1st-person point-of-view narrative. He is just a blank slate for whatever the writer wishes to convey at the time; in the beginning he seems deeply passionate about sciences in order to make us sympathetic to his plight when his valuable possessions are lost, but as soon as he falls in love with the mystery woman, he doesn't even care that he's stopped paying attention to his scientific career, and despite all the discussions about sciences, Daniel doesn't seem at all passionate about the subject anymore. He hardly reacts at all to all the revolutionary scientific discussions around him, merely observes them; at one point he obediently asks "Doesn't God exist?" and then doesn't think about it anymore. Despite coming from a very traditional background, he doesn't seem to be at all troubled that he's falling in love with a highly unconventional woman who is a thief, habitually dresses as a man, lives independently and knows much more about sciences than he does. I'm not saying that a man can't love such a woman, but someone with Daniel's background ought to have had some digesting to do about it, or at least remarked on how it surprisingly doesn't bother him.

The mystery woman herself, Lucienne Bernard, would have potential to be interesting, but somehow she's not very convincing either. Maybe she's too much packed into one, maybe she's too much of a 21st century feminist dream come true, maybe she doesn't struggle enough with the limits the world would really pose for her unconventionality, maybe Stott just doesn't know how to make characters vivid and believable. Maybe all of these things. All other characters remain two-dimensional when they ought to be much more than that, and the grisette girlfriend of Daniel's roommate feels more like a post-1960s university student girl than like a 19th century worker woman. Generally, though the pages are filled with history of sciences and details about Paris of 1815 so that part clearly has been researched, Stott fails to make the characters feel like the products of their time. The only really interesting character is the police inspector Jagot who chases our philosopher-thieves. I wish he had been used a bit more.

Also, the plot suffers from some disorientation; it starts out charting the mystery woman and history of sciences but ends up an ordinary crime story about a robbery which doesn't interest me in the least bit and isn't executed very well.

The narrative is also interspersed with scenes about Napoleon's travel to his imprisonment St. Helena. They're well-written and interesting, but not connected to the main story at all, so I don't understand their point.

Stott also suffers from the tendency of many English-speaking writers who write about foreign lands: fulfilling the dialogue with foreign-language (in this case French) words with the belief that this will add "local colour" and feeling of being in that country. It's highly annoying and distracting, and completely unnecessary. I haven't noticed any but English-speakers do this with such frequency, so I blame that they're less used than the rest of us to reading translated books, having so much literature in their own language, and therefore won't believe that the reader doesn't need the constant foreign-language words to believe we're in France. Perhaps it's also because they're not used to speaking foreign languages. I'm not entirely sure why characters who can explain complicated theories of natural sciences in English suddenly feel a need to say things like "Non, vraiment", "Un petit peu" and "Oui" in French. They add nothing to the believability of the story. I believe we're in France if it's said so and the person and place names are French. When I was recently reading a translation of *The Count of Monte Cristo* I also didn't need Edmond Dantès to say "Oui" to believe we're in France.

Despite these flaws, the story was a quick and fairly entertaining read with the writing flowing by effortlessly, and I really enjoyed all the scientific and historical stuff. Overall I liked it enough to justify a three-star rating, but no more. I probably will read Stott's other novel some time, but I won't be buying her books.

Sharon says

If you like your historical fiction to be filled with vivid imagery, then Rebecca Stott is the author to read. One review went so far as to say that she has created a new genre--the historical, scientific, romance-thriller. In *The Coral Thief* we are taken to Paris of 1815, shortly after the defeat of Napoleon by the British Navy at Waterloo and about twenty years after the French Revolution. Rebecca said that she spent time in the Rare Books Room at Cambridge Library where she came across an 1815 guidebook to Paris, hence her so vivid portrayal of the city. Daniel Connor is a young medical student from Edinburgh who goes to Paris to study anatomy at the Jardin des Plantes. But all of his introductory documents and specimens get stolen before he can begin his tenure with the famed Dr. Cuvier. Daniel ends up falling in love with his 'thief' who challenges his view of the world at a time when all of Europe is in a pre-Darwin evolutionary debate. The Transformist idea that species are not fixed but changing all of the time becomes a central theme through the book. This was a fascinating time period and place to be in the world, and Rebecca takes you back to this time in history so enjoyably.

♥BookGeek♥ says

Plot: 7/10
Writing: 9/10
Characters: 10/10
Ending: 7/10
Historical detail: 10/10
Engaging: 7/10
Originality: 10/10
Overall: 8/10

Daniel Connor is a young promising student from Edinburgh, that is, until he gets his most important valuables stolen, which includes rare specimens, letters of recommendation and a manuscript. His thief ends

up being a woman who has a particular interest for science and species. But when he starts mingling in her world, things become a little too dangerous for him and his job with the most esteemed species professor in the world. Because the chief of police has a history with the thief and her world, and he's bent on bringing her down.

I liked this book quite a lot, partly because it had a very interesting plot structure behind it (I've never read a novel which mixes science, history and romance before) It's not executed in the best possible way, but it's still good for what it is and what it's trying to say and whatnot.

PROS:

- I liked the characters. Lucienne is a fascinating woman and her story is incredibly touching. I'm not sure about Daniel, but the rest of the group are really interesting and even Jagot was a great villain. Most of them were just really well rounded and their story made sense to me.
- The plot knew where it was going, which wrapped up the book in a nice neat package.
- Of course we know about Napoleon Bonaparte, that's no brainer. But there's not a WHOLE LOT of books on what happened after Bonaparte which made the story a lot more interesting. The politics, the setting, the people really held my interest.
- It's well written. Let's thank Rebecca Stott for not being too bogged down by her research! *thanks is given*

CONS:

- Daniel and his curiosity kind of get annoying. There's a time when Lucienne tells him "You ask too many questions!" when you want to yell that to one of your characters, you know you're heading in a tough spot. He was the only character who really fell flat for me.
- Ok, science and species and corals ARE interesting. But when characters talk about it over and over and over again, it's boring. But do you know what's even more boring? The talk about bird stuffing.
- I finished the book not really entranced by the ending. Not giving anything away, but it left at a way too hopeful spot, it was really ambiguous and cheesy.
- The next to the last scene is really kind of cheesy. Again not giving anything away, but I really felt like the author had to end this scene to give it a mystery and danger and it fell flat.
- If Stott could just get rid of the Napoleon scenes, that would be nice. Because, there were too many and they were not necessary.

It wasn't a complete success, but in the end, I liked the way it turned out. Beware though, it's not going to be everyone's cup of tea, so if you don't like science and history, this isn't the book for you. If you do, it's a really solid piece of historical fiction. I enjoyed it, and I would definitely recommend it.

Laura Carter says

I can't finish this book. Maybe it's because I read several bad reviews before I even started it. I really did want it to be good. I just don't care about any of the characters, and I'm not even sure the author wants me to care about them. It seems like the author was more concerned with showing off her linguistic prowess than actually making an interesting, readable novel. I am not one to leave a book unfinished, but I really see no point in wasting my time finishing a book that I don't even want to finish, when I could be reading something else. What I read of the book was confusing and sporadic with little to no character development.

Brenna says

I "won" this book by entering goodreads' first reads drawing. Score! I am fancy and have an advance readers' edition. It's interesting to get a little peek into the book publishing/marketing process. We'll see how the book turns out; I've just started.

So I finished the book a couple of days ago and I have to say I was a little disappointed. The premise is fantastic: a British medical student travels to post-Napoleon Paris to study with a scientist whose project consists of painstakingly cataloging all known species on the planet (this is pre-Darwin, but ideas along that vein are discussed). On his way into the city, the medical student's specimens and letter of recommendation to the famous scientist are stolen by a mysterious beautiful woman. As the story progresses, the main character begins to lose the aspects of his identity that he considered formative--his ambition, dedication to work, etc.--because of the theft. Instead, he becomes enmeshed with the woman and the underworld of Paris. (Literally, at the end.)

So this book seemingly has all the ingredients to make me love it: it's well researched; it has an interesting premise; museums are involved...alas. The buildup to the climactic scene takes forever, and the climactic scene itself is short and a letdown. The writing is eh. The characters' relationships make no sense--I don't care how Caravaggio-esque the med student is: there's no way the mystery-beautiful-woman-thief would involve herself with him unless it was only to use him, and that's not what happened. Why are there vignettes of Napoleon's journey to St. Helena interspersed with the rest of the story?

The scientific history aspect was really interesting. I really appreciated how much research went into this novel. I just wish the book had been better executed--it had so much promise.

Laura says

It's 1815 and Daniel Connor, fresh out of medical school in Edinburgh, is full of excitement as he arrives in Paris to begin a research assignment at the famed Jardin des Plantes botanical garden and museum under renowned Dr. Cuvier. On his journey he meets a mysterious and alluring woman who tantalizes him with intriguing discussions of "transformism," the beginnings of evolutionary theory. But it turns out that beauty has disguised her real intent. When Daniel wakes from an ill-advised nap he discovers that his introductory papers and his prized coral specimens have been stolen. Seeking restitution, fearing that his career will be finished before it begins, Daniel goes to the police and meets with feisty Jagot, a former criminal now turned investigator, who has a long and violent history with Daniel's mystery lady, Lucienne Bernard.

Author Rebecca Stott also captures the electric atmosphere of new ideas that pervaded post-revolutionary Paris as Daniel and Lucienne and their friends toss about philosophies and theories just evolving at that time. But all intellectual ideas fall by the wayside as Daniel must choose between his burgeoning career and his deep love for Lucienne.

Stott also creates a wonderful blend of action, history and passion; weaving in real people, philosophies and events as Daniel becomes enmeshed in Jagot's pursuit of Lucienne. The book even includes period drawings to complement descriptions of the vast collection of artifacts that Napoleon had amassed during his reign. The Coral Thief is a great story for fans of historic fiction who like an intricate plot and a touch of romance.

Shomeret says

I thought this book took a fresh approach. It's a crime novel from the criminals' perspective and the author makes these criminal protagonists interesting and sympathetic. They aren't Robin Hood types, but Lucienne the philosopher/thief belongs to the French aristocratic class that was the object of the Scarlet Pimpernel's mission during the revolution. So Lucienne might be considered peripherally related to Baroness Orczy's counter-revolutionary hero. Yet the attitude toward the revolution in this novel is complex and ambivalent. I enjoyed the political and intellectual stew in which the novel fermented itself along with the plot and counter plot intrigue.

Heather says

In Paris in 1815, everything is changing. Napoleon is in exile, on his way to Saint Helena. France has a king again, and in Paris new streets are being laid, old buildings torn down. The freedoms, or illusions of freedom, of the Revolution are disappearing: Paris is no longer the place where any idea can be expressed. And Daniel Connor, a medical student who does anatomical drawings, is there to see it all: he's come from Edinburgh to study with Georges Cuvier at the Jardin des Plantes. At the start of his trip, though, a woman charms him then steals his luggage, which contains gifts for Cuvier, a manuscript, and a letter of recommendation. Not surprisingly, Daniel has to change his plans, and also not surprisingly, his perceptions of himself and the world change as he stays in Paris and finds out more about both the city and the beautiful thief.

This book's got so much in it that's satisfying: intrigue and romance and intelligence, Napoleon's exile (short sections about his trip to Saint Helena are interspersed with Daniel's story), Lamarck and Cuvier and theories of "transformism" vs. the fixed hierarchy of species, the prehistoric past. (The woman on the mail coach, before taking Daniel's bag, tells him how "the entire Paris basin [...] was under water thousands of years ago," how "Paris was just a hollow in the seafloor," how what is now a city was once home only to oysters and coral and fish (p 7).) Perhaps most pleasing, to me, was all the description, concrete and exquisite: the streets and markets and quais of Paris, the alleys and ateliers, quail baked with ginger, branching coral, old bones, museum displays, mint tea, the light and the heat and the rain and the cats and the pigeons.

Corinne says

I had a hard time reading this book. Events jumped around too quickly for me to follow, but perhaps that was the author's intent. I wasn't drawn to any of the characters. The story itself was intriguing, but it was a hard read to get through. For me, it wasn't one of those books that I just couldn't put down. It was just okay.

Miles says

I enjoyed this book, but not as much as I had expected. After all, it's got action, science, history and passion with a mysterious, beautiful, older woman. This should have been something I loved. I did read it quickly, and enjoyed the descriptions of early 1800's Paris and the issues surrounding the disputes around evolution (are species fixed or changing?), but the story hit a lull in the middle and never quite recovered for me. I did like the set-up of having a young man just starting out in life losing all his credentials - that's a very sympathetic character. How can you help but root for him? Very clever. Stott is a good writer, but the book could have been even better. I did like the character of the chief of police who is a former thief on the take (based on a real man), but I think the structure was the main problem for me. The first half of the book involves finding the mystery woman and uncovering why she has taken all of Daniel Connor's materials, the

second half involves planning a heist of a stolen diamond and learning about the history of our mystery woman and her friends. I was hoping for more action and / or a longer time line that would have brought us up to the time of Darwin. In other words, this should either have been a great historical adventure story or a cerebral thriller (as was claimed on the cover) that captured and told the full story of the scientific evolution debate. The alternating brief Napoleon chapters were interesting, but I don't think they added to the book.

Sara says

If Rebecca Stott's goal was to create a vivid feel of Paris after the Napoleonic wars, this novel is a complete success. As for the plot and characters she builds this vibrant setting around, they definitely take a backseat in her vivid re-creation. Her story starts as an intriguing mystery novel, young scientist Daniel Connor heads to Paris to study with the greats in a nexus of brilliant and important thought of the day, Paris. On the train into town, he is near hypnotized by a beautiful stranger, and ends up having some priceless fossils stolen from him. When he tries to recover his items, he meets the Police Chief, a corrupt and former master thief who has his own agenda concerning this robbery. The novel quickly morphs into a caper story with who is using whom elements.

This narrative is interspersed with an imagined tale of Napoleon's journey to exile which Stott doesn't even bother to connect to the story in any real way beyond a few casual comments. Its almost as if you are watching a an Oceans Elevers/Departed type movie and your spouse keeps changing the channel to an documentary on Napoleon's exile and Post Revolutionary Paris. You don't get bored with one program or the other, but the mixture feels somewhat bumpy at best. Daniel Connor also makes one inexpiable decision after another which doesn't help.

The writing however is great, and Stott consistently uses several phrases that light up. The Police Chief (who is based on fact in a stranger then fiction turn), and some of the scenes that describe Revolutionary violence are the story's fabulous and moving highlights.

Charlene says

I really wanted to like this book. In fact, I think I am the target audience for this very sub genre of historical fiction, but nothing grabbed me. Connecting with any character or idea in this book was just not possible for me.

Misfit says

Gave up around page 70, not enough to interest me to even slog through it at the gym. Almost cut the cardio short to shorten the pain.

Stacia says

I really enjoyed The Coral Thief as a historical fiction piece (though the characterization could have been

stronger, imo). Stott provided many fascinating facts about the Paris scientific community after the fall of Napoleon, specifically lots of emerging thought around the ideas of transmutation & evolution. Recommended for those who enjoy historical fiction w/ a dose of science.

Barbara says

Such an interesting story. Full of history in Paris around 1815. Napoleon Bonaparte had just been defeated at Waterloo and was being escorted to the island of St. Helena. This story is about a young man, Daniel Conner, a medical student who had come to Paris to study under Georges Cuvier, a French naturalist and zoologist at the Jardin des Plantes. He falls under the spell of a mysterious woman and their story is woven through all this history of Paris. Bits of the story follow Napoleon on his trip to St. Helena. The main story is about Daniel and this woman, Lucienne Bernard which is unusual and bohemian to say the least but I was so intrigued with this history of an changing and unsettled Paris I didn't mind, in fact it seemed natural for this place and time.

Vipula says

The plot is based a decade or more after the French revolution and the age of "Terror", just after Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo. The story follows a young medical student, Daniel Connor, into the bedlam of Paris. Paris, then, is the beating heart of Europe – the scientific, cultural and political center. As the city is coming to terms with the new regime, students from all over Europe are travelling to Paris to make their own careers. And Daniel is just one of them– an aspiring researcher; Daniel comes to Paris to work with the famed Dr. Cuvier, with important letters of recommendation and rare fossils as an offering. The story begins with Daniel's encounter with this dark haired beauty who mysteriously befriends Daniel on his night coach ride to Paris. When the morning comes, she is gone and so are the letters and the fossils. Daniel is devastated and in his interview with the Police Commissioner Jargot, he learns that he encountered Lucienne Bernard – a famous Parisian thief and one of Paris's most wanted. I was interested so far...the novel had a lot of promise – mysterious strangers in the night, the bustle of Paris, questions of evolution and background political drama. Now Daniel bumps into Lucienne again and there is some serious chemistry there. However, instead of reporting to the police, as he had promised, he just comforts her and asks her to return his stuff. Eventually, he predictably falls in love with her and enters her world of Paris. And this is the part where I begin to lose interest. So somewhere down the line, Lucienne has to do one last job before she can leave this life forever and create a new identity – and then some Ocean's 11 type of robbery is planned andwhatever. It's really frustrating to give a few hours to some book and then it goes nowhere. Rebecca Scott is a gifted writer – there is no doubt about the beauty of her writing style. I was however, not so impressed by the story teller in her. I could not pin-point the central theme of the novel – it was about everything, yet nothing. There is another thing that I am noticing more about contemporary literature – all authors, I believe have in the back of the mind a potential movie deal. Hence, their characters become larger than life glamorous beings, there are some really smart dialog exchanges where every character is witty, some fast paced action scenes, great visual affects and ambiguous endings. I wish when they are writing a novel they would not treat it as a screenplay. But nevertheless, the book wasn't a total waste of my time, and there was some breathtaking writing. Some of my favorite lines below:

“ People talk about falling among thieves. I fell among thieves in the city of Paris in 1815, except that it didn't feel like a falling at all – it felt like flight”

“And when the coral spawn, all the other sea organisms follow. It's like a trigger. The fisherman say it's the moon that makes them spawn, she had said, and I said: How can they see the moon? They have on eyes. Perhaps they have other ways of seeing and knowing, she had. Perhaps we all do. There's a grandeur in that.”

Elizabeth Richards says

I'm a GoodReads winner, and so is The Coral Thief! History, intrigue, the cloaked mysterious woman.....I was captivated from the beginning, and then, the one passage that inspired me to finish reading the entire book the very first night I picked it up... "She could have chosen any of us. But she chose me." A brilliantly written novel that reminds us to ask ourselves, " What footprints will I leave behind." You'll enjoy the journey along side the main characters and you'll involve yourself on what it was like to live in a previous time period. Enjoy the ride, and the GoodRead....

Elizabeth

Erik says

I was surprised that I enjoyed this book for its historical context. I was never a big fan of history, so historical fiction has never been much of a draw for me, but I wanted to give it a shot. Stott does an excellent job of weaving history in with her story to make both more interesting. I'd go so far as to say it's piqued my interest in this genre and the history of France.

The story was compelling enough to keep me reading, though not necessarily unique or inspired. I enjoyed the main character's submersion into a part of France he likely never thought existed, much less expected himself to stumble into. The characters were well-drawn, though I can see where this book could have been much thicker had each character been fleshed-out a bit more. Still, there was enough of each to wrap my head around and enjoy their interactions.

In short, it was a quick, fun, and interesting read, as well as an enlightening glimpse at post-revolutionary France.

Kristen says

Even though the subject matter interests me, the book did not. I wondered why I was so bored when the setting should be so interesting. The main character and narrator is ridiculously naive in a way that is frustrating and unbelievable. The woman who alters his destiny at no point seems like a real person. Her motivations make no sense. The historical details, while obviously meticulously researched, seem clunky. They should be woven into the fabric of the plot so that the reader absorbs them, but is not taken out of the story. Instead, it seems like the narrative halts from time to time so that a character can explain some historical point in a completely unrealistic way. At several points the narrator breaks into the story to say something like "if I had known _____ then, I would not have done _____," which completely destroys any

element of suspense. The majority of the reviews on Goodreads for this book are positive ones, so maybe this book just caught me at the wrong time.

Alison Moore says

Like several other reviewers I didn't enjoy this book as much as I'd hoped, and the plot and characters failed to come alive for me, despite the author's impeccable credentials (she's Professor of English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia). I found it hard to engage with the book even though it has plenty of winning elements, which have worked well in other novels. There's the Paris coming of age novel in which a young man comes to Paris and falls in love with an older woman (Flaubert's *A Sentimental Education* is one example). There are echoes of *Les Misérables*: criminal viewed with sympathy who has depth and strength of character, the wily and determined Paris policeman whose pursuit of the criminal is a central motif of Hugo's novel as well as in *The Coral Thief*, and who have very similar names (Javert and Jagot), an underground chase (sewers in *Les Misérables*; catacombs in *The Coral Thief*). Wilkie Collins's *Moonstone* also comes to mind, in which a central feature of the plot is the recovery of a lost diamond of great value.

Add to this the gripping and well-researched story of the 'evolution of evolution' (or at least of the understanding of the theory) and of the political turmoil of the time, and the book should be guaranteed success. So why has its reception been lukewarm, judging from the average star ratings and the sentiments expressed in other reviews?

For me there are several factors. I wonder if the novel arose more out of the author's academic interest in the qualities of a good novel and in the need for historical fiction to be well researched, and less out of creative impulse. I had the impression of a meticulous collecting together of the various elements and devices of a successful novel, which are then impeccably arranged just like the carefully catalogued and classified collections of species in the museums of the collectors in the period in question. Everything is in place, but the life force isn't in it, any more than it is in a collection of stuffed birds, however much it can teach the observer. Victorian women loved to make scrapbooks, and this novel has the feel of a scrapbook, put together with love and care but no substitute for the life the women were perhaps missing.

I have to admit, too, to being put off by books which are published with reading groups in mind - with a list of questions for discussion. I love to discuss books with others, but I am less than comfortable with being given such obvious pointers to what I 'should' be looking for - a touch of post-adolescent resistance creeps in, even decades after my teenage years have disappeared

Finally, I wonder if anyone has noticed what seems to be the writer's debt to George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, some of whose characters' interests echo those in *The Coral Thief* - like Lucienne Dorothea Brooke is an intellectual young woman (though her circumstances are very different, and Daniel Connor has something in common with Tertius Lydgate - not least because he settles eventually in Derbyshire and makes his career there. He even marries someone called Celia, in whose father's library he was permitted to browse. Last, but not least, there's a description in *The Coral Thief* on page 37 of a woman in the Louvre of 'a woman dressed in grey seated nearby. Her long cloak, fastened at the neck, was thrown back from her arms, and one beautiful ungloved hand pillowed her cheek. Her white bonnet made a halo around her braided dark-brown hair. She was not looking at the paintings; her large eyes were fixed dreamily on a streak of sunlight that fell across the floor.' Compare this with the description of Dorothea Casaubon in *Rome*, in Chapter 19 of *Middlemarch*, '... a breathing, blooming girl, whose form ... was clad in Quakerish grey drapery; her long cloak, fastened at the neck, was thrown backward from her arms, and one beautiful ungloved hand pillowed her cheek, pushing somewhat backward the white beaver bonnet which made a sort of halo to her face

around the simply braided dark-brown hair. She was nt looking at the sculpture, probably not even thinking of it: her large eyes were fixed dreamily on a streak of sunlight that fell across the floor.'

This cannot be a coincidence, but it's hard to tell whether Rebecca Stott inserted this description of a woman who plays no part at all in the plot as an 'in-joke' for literary readers or for members of reading groups, or whether she is herself employing a 'scrapbook' approach in which cut-out figures can be positioned anywhere in one's composition. Either way, my attention had been caught by this description, which had more life in it than the text thus far, and I was disappointed to find that this woman did not feature further in *The Coral Thief*. It was only because of the Middlemarch connection at the end that it crossed my mind that the woman might be meant for Dorothea. A bit of checking revealed the uncanny similarity. And maybe it was a subliminal awareness of the change of style from the rest of *The Coral Thief* that was the trigger for my interest in this woman. No doubt about it – George Eliot wrote well!
