



Under the Poppy

Kathe Koja

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From a wartime brothel to the intricate high society of 1870s Brussels, *Under the Poppy* is a breakout novel of childhood friends, a love triangle, puppetmasters, and reluctant spies.

Under the Poppy is a brothel owned by Decca and Rupert. Decca is in love with Rupert, but he in turn is in love with her brother, Istvan. When Istvan comes to town, louche puppet troupe in tow, the lines of their age-old desires intersect against a backdrop of approaching war. Hearts are broken when old betrayals and new alliances - not just their own - take shape, as the townsmen seek refuge from the onslaught of history by watching the girls of the Poppy cavort onstage with Istvan's naughty puppets . . .

Under the Poppy is a vivid, sexy, historical novel that zips along like the best guilty pleasure.

Nominated for the IMPAC Award. Winner of the Gaylactic Spectrum Award.

Under the Poppy Details

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From Reader Review Under the Poppy for online ebook

Ivana Neši? says

Dobar deo radnje romana odvija se u bordelu, tako da je moral likova, a valjda i naš dok ?itamo, krajnje nekonvencionalan (ali daleko od nepostojeg). Ako sa tim imate problem - komotno presko?ite *Under the Poppy*.

Slede?a nekonvencionalna stvar je stil. Autorka meša upravni i neupravni govor na neobi?an na?in, grade?i duga?ke re?enice što na samom po?etku deluje malo konfuzno, ali meni se takav postupak baš dopao. Nekako prisnije uvla?i ?itaoca u radnju i te re?enice teku lepo i bez seckanja koje upravni govor nekad pravi, ?ak i vizuelno.

I ima puno opisa ljudi, stvari i prostora, naro?ito kostima, haljina i nakita. Ali opisi nisu dosadni, samo nam pomažu da još dublje osetimo opštu dekadenciju koja u svakojakim uslovima prati protagoniste.

I nemam pojma šta još, o radnji je valjda dovoljno re?eno u sižeu pa ne moram ja.

Jedino mi se nije dopalo što je kraj malo razvu?en. Znae onaj ose?aj kad završite knjigu i kažete "Au, šta pro?itah!"" E pa ovde toga nije bilo jer je trajala poglavlje-dva predugo. Ali opraštam joj i radujem se nastavcima.

Aubrey says

3.5/5

I don't know what I was thinking when I added this, but it was likely along the lines of "Oh, this looks generally intriguing," rather than "Oh hey I don't really know anything about 1870's Brussels so maybe this will be a good introduction to it in the historical fic sense." Alas, the latter was not what the author aimed for, and a book that would have interested me very much several years ago does not do much for me now. In addition, the intrigue of gay erotica promised by the description was neither very gay nor quite erotic, so if anyone is looking into this as a possible to-read, be aware the book's merits are not implied from the beginning.

What I cannot read anymore are books set in a particular locale that do not give much, if any, evidence of said locale. Here, we have the Franco-Prussian War, but beyond a vague menace along the borders of the plot and several unsavory military types with connections spanning several countries, it was all of a general setting. Whorehouses, manipulation, acrid childhoods growing into viciously cunning adults, and all manner of general grotesqueries that have been much abused in many a contextless neo-Victorian type of production. I have a great deal of experience with such stories, which is why I went into this looking for something more solid. I know now that I would be better off with literature birthed of the actual era, rather than hoping historical fiction paid as much attention as its nonfictional past.

Had to see, to follow their departing carriage through the quiet streets, to scale as quietly that steep slate roof, gripping hands skinned bloody, agile as those long-ago days in the country garden, climbing the trellises, the elms, their vast green loneliness, a loneliness so intense that it had, sometimes, no feeling to it at all, only a kind of flavor, the taste of grit between the teeth, the tang of unripe apricots.

What the book did have going for it was character definition, a playful drive with words, and an obsession with puppets that drew me into their world a fair bit. It also helped that the second part was much stronger than the first, a quality that was part clearing of the haze, part settling down into the cast that one suspected

the author had initially started with before a prologue was deemed necessary. All in all, it was a decent read, with the added bonus of letting me know that this type of lit no longer appeals.

Seregil of Rhiminee says

Originally published at Risingshadow.

Under the Poppy is a mesmerizing, dark and erotic historical novel for adults. It's almost like a decadent dream that lingers somewhere between fantasy and reality. Once you start to read this novel and surrender yourself to its world, you're instantly hooked by the story.

There are several different elements in this novel. In my opinion Under the Poppy is an unforgettable story about love, unrequited love, lust, lovers, romance, friends, sex, eroticism, desire, deception, war, whores, gentlemen and naughty puppets. It's difficult to find similar novels, because it is one of a kind. It's a unique and original vision of a theatrical brothel, forbidden love and an impending war that may change everything.

Here's a bit of information about the story:

The events of Under the Poppy take place in a nameless town in a slightly alternate Victorian era Europe. Under the Poppy is a basically a story about a brothel called Under the Poppy and its owners, performers and customers, but it's also much more than that. The brothel is owned by Rupert and Decca. Decca loves Rupert, but Rupert loves her brother, Istvan. When Rupert and Istvan meet each other, their old passion is rekindled... But this is just the beginning, because the first part of this novel is almost like a prologue to the stunning second part, which splendidly ends the novel.

Kathe Koja has created interesting and multilayered characters who have their own past. She writes beautifully about the past of the characters and what has happened to them and how they have come to the brothel. It was fascinating to read their stories.

The protagonists - Rupert, Istvan and Decca - used to be orphans, but then they drifted apart. Now they have found each other again. Rupert and Istvan are richly created and complex characters that love each other. The mistress of the brothel, Decca, adds tension to their relationship, because she loves Rupert. Reading about their past was fascinating, because these scenes reminded me of Charles Dickens.

The other characters range all the way from conspirators and commanders to whores, and each of them is an interesting character, because they all add a wickedly delicious flavour to the novel. I enjoyed reading about them.

The dialogue between the different characters is simply fantastic. There's plenty of wittiness in the dialogues.

It was especially interesting that the author used the theme of masters and puppets in this novel. When I read this novel and began to think about its contents, I noticed that the author used this theme as a tool to explore who's really the master and who's the puppet.

One of the best things about Under the Poppy is that the author uses multiple points of view. Reading this kind of a novel may be a bit challenging, but experienced readers will easily be hooked by the shifting view points. In my opinion this kind of storytelling gives readers a chance to find out what different characters think about themselves and their lives, because each of them have their own stories and each of them has something to hide or reveal.

Kathe Koja's prose is beautiful and deliciously nuanced. It's a real pleasure to read her prose, because the words flow effortlessly and the happenings feel wonderfully vivid. The prose is so good that it can be called poetic. To be honest, Kathe Koja writes amazingly beautiful prose that charmingly highlights the explicitness and decadent nature of the story in a seductive way.

Kathe Koja has managed to bring to life an alternate reality in which rich prose makes the reader fall in love with the story and forget everything else for a few hours. Her descriptions of the places, clothes and customs are deliciously lush and vivid, so that readers can almost taste and smell what's happening on the pages. I think that she has spent quite a lot of time researching these things, because everything feels believable and authentic.

The author writes fluently and boldly about sex, eroticism and sexual acts. This novel has almost everything from heterosexuality to homosexuality. All kind of sexual acts can be seen on stage in *Under the Poppy*, and almost anything is possible within its walls. The visitors that come to the brothel get to witness several sensual and erotic performances that won't leave anybody cold.

One of the best and most intriguing things about *Under the Poppy* is that the author writes impressively about Istvan's puppets. Istvan has a special connection with his puppets, because he seems to think about them first and then about people. Istvan calls his puppets "les mecs" and they have their own names. It was fascinating to read about his puppets and how they were used in different ways on stage. They added a fantastically weird and disturbing element to the story. These puppets almost steal the whole show.

Under the Poppy is a challenging novel, but it is a thoroughly rewarding reading experience. I noticed that this novel successfully breaks normal writing rules. In typical historical novels there aren't as many point of views and the happenings aren't as decadent and mysterious as in this novel. The use of multiple points of views works well and refreshes the novel, because the story opens up gradually and offers glimpses to the lives of the characters and reveals quite a lot of details about them.

I noticed that the author hasn't tied the happenings to an exact period of time (although the exact time isn't mentioned directly, it's easy to figure out when the happenings take place, because there are references to the 1870s Brussels). The author also writes about a nameless war that is slowly approaching. Usually authors, who write historical fiction, are very precise about these things. I liked this kind of storytelling, because it felt refreshing.

Under the Poppy may not be to everybody's liking because of its sexual contents and a bit different kind of a storytelling technique, but those readers, who are used to reading adult material, appreciate a writing style that breaks normal writing rules and want to read something different, will adore and love it. I personally liked *Under the Poppy* very much, because the author has done her best to write a memorable and sensual story that will linger on the reader's mind. It's one of the finest novels I've ever read.

I can highly recommend this novel to everybody who likes historical fiction and wants to read a bit different kind of a story. It can also be recommended to speculative fiction readers and readers who love literary novels. This novel will appeal to everybody, who's willing to immerse himself/herself in a dark, erotic and entertaining story.

Highly recommended!

Alexandra says

This is the second book I read as part of my guest stint on The Writer and the Critic. I'd never heard of Koja before.

Looking around on GoodReads it's clear that this book evokes strong reactions both ways in many people. And I too am riven by indecision about it. The writing is absolutely exquisite; Koja is a mistress of the evocative phrase, the perfect description. It's a delight to read her prose. This delight may be the only thing that got me through the whole book, and even then I skimmed chunks of the last hundred pages or so. Because, sadly, the plot could not carry me, and the characters weren't especially engaging either.

Some spoilers... but not very many.

The novel begins in a brothel in an unnamed town, probably at the tail end of the 19th century, somewhere in Europe. It's owned by Decca and Rupert - not a couple - and as well as whores, Under the Poppy is proud to stage erotic dramas. Real-life drama occurs when Decca's brother Istvan turns up, unearthing old hurts and catalysing all sorts of other problems. There's a war in the offing, so there are soldiers in town, and some rather unsavoury characters who may be involved in the war in more ways than one....

In theory, the plot could have been very interesting: love and personal hurt and betrayal in a time of war can have a lot going for it. And the fact that the novel is set in NoTime, and NoRealPlace, lends a lovely note of the surreal which is aided by the surreality of the Poppy's dramatic presentations, and Istvan's puppets. Sadly, though, the very subtlety that was quite engaging eventually made me very impatient. Very few issues were ever resolved (until the end, where perhaps too much was tied up too nicely for the general tone of the story (contrary, aren't I?)), very little of any character's background was ever fully fleshed out, and while I'm all for mystique there's a line where mystique becomes so opaque as to be ridiculous. For me, Koja crossed that line.

This mystique affected both the plot and the characters. I enjoyed the technique of third-person narrative interspersed with first-person recollections of the past, or commentary on the current situation; that was very well done. However, there wasn't quite enough back story for me to ever fully connect with the characters. And one of the main characters for whom I felt a great deal of sympathy - Decca - ends up being treated so poorly by Koja that I couldn't help but feel offended on her behalf. Yes, Istvan and Rupert are incredibly complex and fascinating characters; but neither of them is very sympathetic (to my mind), and their tantrums got a bit wearing after a while. Unlike someone whose review I read (I don't recall where), Rupert and Istvan will never be among my Top Romantic Pairs of All Time. I rolled my eyes at them too many times.

It wasn't all bad, of course. The mystery of when and where was enough to drive me slightly wild, trying to figure out whether any of the events had genuine historical counterparts. Deeper than that, though, was what Koja was doing with Istvan's puppets. The parallels between Istvan's use of them in precipitating events and reactions in his audience, and the use to which Istvan himself was put (and others, too), was clever, subtle, and rather pointed I thought (in a good way).

Am I glad I read it? No, not really. The plot fell just short of engaging, although as I said the prose was swoon-worthy; and, although the sex wasn't usually that graphic, it was just graphic or suggestive enough that it crossed out of my comfort zone.

Madeline says

1. Do you know that person who always goes on about how - whatever. How original and daring and outrageous they are? How they don't have any patience for bourgeois affectations, and that they're just going straight for, like, blood and raw truth and odd drug habits? You know, they are the human equivalent of the poster for the David Fincher adaptation of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*? And after a while your eyes just sort of glaze over from boredom, and then you feel kind of sorry for them, because they can't see how boring they actually are? You know this person? This book is that person.
2. But, right, you should say something nice, so let me say that Koja's prose is very good. It is snaky and complicated but reads like water. Labyrinths on every page! (Marine labyrinths?) That's not a complaint: I like prose you have to work for. It's the reason this book is getting two stars. (Aaaaalthough, she re-uses a handful of fairly unusual words and it loses its charm pretty quickly.)
3. I guess it's not really *Under the Poppy*'s fault that it uses a bunch of tropes I've just sort of got tired of. Number one among them is the Special Brothel. You know this book, you have probably read it: it is a story about a whorehouse, but not just *any* whorehouse because, I guess ordinary ones are boring? So, there is something ~*special*~ about this one. Except, *Under the Poppy* is really two novels (short ones, but still) and the first one ends up being totally pointless: the second half could survive without it, and frankly the whole thing isn't . . . interesting enough to be invested in it. This book, generally, would have been better if Koja'd gone the Mamet route and cut out the first twenty minutes and all the backstory. The backstory makes the characters look ridiculous and boring.
 - 3a. PARTICULARLY in the case of the two main characters, Rupert and Istvan, who broke up when they were teenagers because - wait for it - they had a fight. Yes! Is your mind blown? Other characters wonder about this youthful parting of ways like it was a huge tragedy, on top of a mystery. And you, reader, are just like: well, they had a fight. It's not exactly on par with standing up your boyfriend at the train station when you're about to flee Nazis, okay?
 - 3b. Over-reacting and running a way is pretty much how everyone gets through their lives in this book. There's one person who overreacts and stays (in the Special Brothel), but she's also firmly grounded in reality unlike EVERYBODY ELSE, so you respect her teeth-and-nails approach to keeping property.
4. Everyone in this book takes their lives and actions Much Too Seriously. And then they turn around and obsess over the main characters, even though on the page Rupert and Istvan are both kind of charisma-less. (Less of a problem if their charm and irresistibility weren't such a Point.) And the novel harps on its themes without doing anything with them, so it's hard not to roll your eyes after a point.
5. It's the sort of book that reminds you of all the books its ripping off, which you'd much rather be reading. I don't expect any book to be the next *As Meat Loves Salt*, even if I'm always *looking* for the next AMLS, but how can you not compare them? And how can you find UTP anything but wanting in the comparison? And in Decca's desire for home after a war, how can you help but think of Scarlett O'Hara? But this isn't nearly so compelling a book. And in the focus on lovers in the underworld, who are also in high society for a while, how can you help but think of *Swordspoint*? Ellen Kushner helpfully blurbed the book and everything. But it doesn't *work* like *Swordspoint* works. And in a vaguely Francophone setting (this vagueness is another failure of the book), populated by iron-willed women and wilting men (Benjamin is seriously just Cheri with the serial number filed off, and plus gayness), how can you help but think of Colette? But then you're just like, "damn, I'd rather be reading Colette right now." I picked this up because I read a review that name-dropped Angela Carter (it's easy to think of *Nights at the Circus*) and Sarah Waters (not seeing this one so much) and got neither, really. (Angela Carter had a sense of humor, for one thing.)
6. I can see very clearly what *Under the Poppy* wants to do, but it never earns any of those things. It's really disappointing.

Incandragon says

This is a beautifully written book. It uses a non-standard format that works astonishingly well for the book's theme. (Love, love, love how Koja incorporated that theme.) It's written with an omniscient narrator, with shifting POVs, and the dialog is entwined with the narrative prose.

The rhythm and tone is stunning. The characters are delightful. I was even prepared to love the book regardless of the ending, but the ending was fabulous.

It's a thick read, though. This is not a fluffy book.

(I know some people were put off by the suspension of belief required by the first chapter. I still think it's one of the more riveting first chapters I've ever read.)

NOTE: Lots of all kinds of sex. It takes place in a brothel, for starters.

Robert Beveridge says

Kathe Koja, **Under the Poppy** (Small Beer Press, 2010)

Kathe Koja has been doing this for twenty years now. Actually, a little more; her first novel, *The Cipher*, kicked off Dell's ill-fated, but brilliant, horror line Abyss. If I remember correctly, it was published in April 1991. Yes, I'm a big enough fan to be reasonably certain about that. *The Cipher* was unlike anything I'd read before, a perfect blend of horror, surrealism, and existentialism I came to call "horror-of-absence", for lack of a more streamlined term. It never got all that big, though a few other writers glommed onto it over the years and turned out books as good as *The Cipher*. But Koja, the doyenne, worked in relative obscurity (part of the reason Abyss faded so quickly is that the golden age of eighties horror died right about the time Dell decided to try a horror line), releasing book after book and getting better and better. Until she didn't. After 1995's *Kink*, which saw her abandoning Dell for Henry Holt (to this day, I've no idea who initiated that move, which was shockingly ill-conceived; Holt haven't been a viable fiction publisher for decades), who were sure to lend no publicity whatsoever for what turned out to be just another book in a string of absolutely stunning works, Koja disappeared altogether for seven years, barring the release of a collection of short stories she'd published in various little magazines. She re-emerged in 2002 with *Straydog*, the first of a series of young adult novels, and a book just as good as the last three adult novels she'd released in 93-94-95. While Koja is one of the finest voices working in American fiction today, and with each book she picked up a small but vocal number of diehard fans, she still worked in relative obscurity.

And thus we come to 2010, and what may well be Kathe Koja's breakout novel, *Under the Poppy*. It is, if you do the math, her first adult novel in fifteen years, and quite an adult novel it is (it approaches sex with a frankness befitting *Kink*, that lovely, bitter, undervalued thing). Plans to adapt it for the stage had been announced before its publication. It was dumped by its headline publisher, so it went to Small Beer Press, who were willing to lavish the love and attention on it that it deserved. And something started happening that hadn't at Dell or FSG (or, god help us, Holt): the name Kathe Koja started being spread by something other than word of mouth from the devoted. And people started reading the book.

Let me tell you right now: if you fall on the side who loved it, stop reading this review. Get up, right now, go

to your local bookstore, and special-order Koja's entire backlist. Much of it is probably out of print now; I know *Kink* is. So you'll have to start haunting used bookstores. Do it. Because while I enjoyed *Under the Poppy* a great deal, it can't hold a candle to the power of *Kink* or *Skin*, echoes of both of which are never far from the surface of this book, or *Strange Angels*, the 1994 novel with which Koja and Dell parted ways, and which is first among equals of the four best novels Koja has produced (the others being *Skin*, *Kink*, and *Straydog*, and to this day no other author has ever gotten four five-star reviews from me, though Catherynne Valente has three and counting). Read them. I'll wait. Then branch out to the other stuff, the excellent young adult novels and *The Cipher*, and revel in some of the best writing you will ever read. *Under the Poppy*, while not among her best work, is an excellent introduction to it.

The first half of the book takes place in a vaguely turn-of-the-century vaguely-Belgian sort of place. As one blurbist on the jacket puts it, this is a time and place of its own, and needs no anchoring in the real world. Three old friends, whose relationship has changed over the years, soured, find themselves back together again: Rupert, who runs a brothel called Under the Poppy in a small, anonymous town; Decca, his partner and whoremistress, who's in love with him; and Istvan, Decca's brother, who glides into town on a breeze one day, and whom Rupert is in love with. That first half of the book is a long, delicate game of cat and mouse between Rupert and Istvan, and between the town and the surrounding war which threatens to engulf it while it tries to stay steadfast in its neutrality. (That the second half of the book takes place somewhere else should tell you how well everyone fares.)

This is a book that has divided people, and while I haven't done any deep study, I have a suspicion I can find the line upon which the division lies without too much trouble: Koja, like Valente and any number of other writers I revere, has always been first and foremost concerned with *how* the message is given, rather than what the message actually is. This is as it should be, though for some reason there are any number of readers who either don't recognize this or refuse to believe it. (There is a simple proof, and I wasn't going to include it here, but I may as well in the service of completeness. If the message were more important than the medium, then why would certain tellers of old folktales be more revered than others? Why is Perrault's Cinderella—a folktale found almost universally in ancient literature—beloved while hundreds, if not thousands, of other versions of the tale are now extinct, and why do the various modern retellers of Cinderella all have their attackers and defenders? The reason is obvious: what draws or repels us is not the tale itself, but *the way the tale is told*.) Her language here is very precise, very measured, as it usually is, though this is the first time she has turned it to the historical novel. It's a good fit, perhaps better here than it was in something like *Skin*, but I'm hoping that those who have discovered it now will rediscover how wonderful it is in the earlier novels.

Those who hate it, on the other hand, always seem to attack the second half of the book as being “slow”, “boring”, “unnecessary”, or the like. I can't quite figure out what they're talking about, as the events of the second half of the book are directly related to those in the first half. Some first-half characters do vanish without a trace, and I do wish we'd heard about what happened to them (one in particular, can't say which without spoilers) through gossip or what have you, but given the framework, not hearing about them is perfectly believable.

In short, this is a book about language, as much as it is a book about war, love, puppetry, or anything else. Most of Koja's books are. As such, I can't help but love it. Your mileage may vary, but if it doesn't, and if this is your first exposure to Koja, I envy you; there is a world of wonderful writing awaiting you in her glorious backlist. ****

Hannah says

so I meant to review this forever and ever ago (like, in October when I actually read it) but I couldn't articulate what I wanted to say about it beyond "kathe koja is a genius and I love this book so much that I metaphorically weep whenever I contemplate its existence" so I didn't. but I've read so many lackluster and *eh* romance-y books lately that I felt it was my duty, as a citizen upon this earth, to at least TRY, and that is why we're here, let's go.

a basic, too basic, summary: under the poppy is about a cast of characters who come together in a 19th century brothel-slash-stageshow called *the poppy*, run by childhood friends rupert and decca, when decca's brother and rupert's former lover istvan comes to town with his troupe of puppets as that town is on the brink of ruin and war.

the first thing to say is that not everybody is going to dig this book - you only have to look at the super divisive goodreads reviews to see that. people tend to either love it dearly or really not get into it at all, and I can see why; a lot of things about it are going to turn off some person or another. it is very unpretensed and sometimes crude about sex, which there is much of because the first part of it is set in a brothel; the writing is almost stream-of-consciousness and thick and tangled and sometimes disorienting, and it gleefully throws rules and grammar to the wind; the romance is not easy or uncomplicated; the atmosphere is quite surreal and misty and fogged, and the setting is never clearly defined even as far as what country/year they're in except in the blurb for the book.

and all of these things could have resulted in a disaster and maybe should have. alternating third person chapters with first person diary-style side-character introspection chapters, flitting bird-like between POVs from paragraph to paragraph, sometimes even midsentence, flashbacks all over the place, changing out the whole setting and a huge swath of characters halfway through to start on a largely-new plotline, it should not work at all, but I rated this book five stars and put it on my favorites shelf, so you already know I am going to say that for me, at least, it DOES work, masterfully, almost perfectly, and every device and every storytelling tool and every long twisty ornate sentence comes together to form this truly strange, truly unique, truly beautiful thing that stands out brightly from any book I've read before or since (discounting the sequel).

I think it really comes down to the fact that kathe koja is, simply, good enough to do all of these things, and break all of these rules, and end up with something wonderful not despite this but because of it. language is her bitch; she knows exactly what she's doing with it, she knows exactly why she is twisting every convention that she twists. this crazy word-garden of a story is tended by hands so capable that every little misfit seed springs up into a huge, healthy flower of ten different colors in lovely, detailed, nuanced shades, and this metaphor has gotten away from me, but you see what I am trying to say here.

so that's all part of why I love it.

the second part of why I love it is because of the characters, who are many, and varied, and all very distinct from one another, and who all come alive even if they're very minor, in part because of the diary-style introspection chapters I mentioned before. but the main characters do truly take the show, and they deserve to. every part of rupert and istvan and decca and the rest feels *real*, from their dialogue to their thoughts to their hopes and dreams and flaws. they are three-dimensional, and so is every action they take, every way they influence the story. they are not written simply so they do not love or hate simply, and especially they do not live simply. this is true as well for the background characters, who could have blended in together, especially the girls working in the brothel, but they never do.

and then the romance. under the poppy is a love story at heart, and it is a fantastic one. rupert and istvan are

childhood sweethearts runaway from each other and reunited, bitter but full of infinite affection for each other. as children they were orphans on the street together, and as they survived together they learned that being together was the only way they *could* survive. there's so much between them, so much old love and so many old resentments, that it's all very complicated and none of the obstacles in their path are easily overcome, but at the bottom of it they're made to be together, really, and the road will always take them that way in the end. there are so many lovely tender parts, and touching parts, and reader, I swooned. there are no cliches here, no cutting corners. this romance beats like a heart, sometimes painful but always alive. and if I ever had to rank otp's, rupert and istvan would be super super high up there. like, so high.

and I love it also because of the way it deals with its themes and its atmosphere, which are almost characters on their own. the main thread running throughout under the puppy is one of puppets and puppetry, of theater and performance and *all the world's a stage*, and it is sewn with care and precision, laced through every character and through every storyline. and looped through the atmosphere, which is one of curtains and velvet, dreamy and vague, asking *what is real and what is a show? what is a choice and what is a gloved man pulling the puppet strings? and what is the difference between them?* it indulges in all of these questions and all of this dreaminess - indulges in itself without ever becoming self-indulgent, somehow. for a book that never specifically names the setting, the feel of it is vivid and tangible. I think it almost substitutes atmosphere for setting - the story takes place not in a town or a county or a grounded place, but in the space between sleep and dream, in the warm and almost magical dwelling-space of the subconscious, in the feeling you get as you sit in the audience of a theater, waiting for the curtains to part. the narration itself, twisty and intricate, comes across almost like a puppet-master, manipulating from the shadows, putting on a hell of a show and reveling in it.

under the poppy is a lot of things. it is sparking, and surreal, and satisfying, and scintillating, and singular. a lot of s-words in particular. and all of these things are why I had to write this approx. ten thousand word thesis on "why I like this book very much and I had to vomit it all over you and maybe you should read it, thank you." also, I feel like I should add that somehow, I loved the sequel even more, so take from that what you will. the third and final book comes out this year, which is a divine sign that you should hop on this right now.

so do that.

Owen says

Ever since I read Kathe Koja's novel Buddha Boy a few years ago, followed by a few of her other YA books, I knew she had become one of my favorite authors. After doing some research, I learned that she writes not just YA, but also horror and erotic books for adults. I was eager to see whether or not her voice would translate well through adult fiction, and I would be lying if I said I wasn't at least a little hesitant. After all, she had created some of the most realistic teen characters I had ever read, so I didn't know if she would be able to do the same with adults.

It turns out I had nothing to worry about. I guess it was a bit foolish to question how well she could write adult characters, considering she is one. Twice she has proven to me that she can master a genre, and I have no doubt her horror books are just as excellent. She could probably pick any genre and create an excellent book with it.

Brothels. What do I even know about brothels? Well, I suppose I learned more about them from this book. The setting of Under the Poppy is a 19th century brothel and the cast consists mainly of prostitutes and the

brothel owners, Decca and Rupert, as well as Istvan- Rupert's lover. There is tension, sexual frustration, and lots of madness.

Under the Poppy is very theatrical and dramatic, and has been adapted to the stage. On one hand it would make a very entertaining play, but on the other, there is so much in this book and physically acting it out would make the viewer miss the complete experience.

At times this book is very hard to get through, I will admit that. In the beginning, the prose tripped me up not because it is dry or boring, but because the language is very unfamiliar (it is set in the 1800s, after all). But once I got about a hundred pages in, I encountered no problems. In fact, I read about the last two hundred pages in one day.

If you like historical books, Victorian era prostitution, and puppets, then Under the Poppy is for you.

This book also has the weirdest trailer i've ever seen:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNxktL...>

Tocotin says

Whore. Whore whore whore whore. What the hell is this, the Holy Bible? No, it's a book about a brothel. Go figure.

Whore. This is the most used word in this book. It's used casually. It's used with a wink. It's supposed to make the book edgy. It fails.

Recently, this is one of my most hated words, and it makes me hate books which use it so casually. Especially - I'm sorry - if the author is a woman and employs it in the narration. Seriously, it's counterproductive. It's lazy, callous, and traitorous.

So, what's going on? There is a brothel, supposedly in 19th century Belgium, only nearly every character has an English name. There is a lot of man-love, except it's never shown, neither do the characters have any sort of chemistry between them. (The dudes are loved by girls, but they don't care, because WHORE.) One of the dudes is super angsty and sulky, the other one is a brilliant puppeteer, and a joker too. In an opening scene he is fisting a girl with a wooden arm of his puppet, but the girl doesn't notice it's a puppet, because stupid and WHORE, dontcha know. I kept waiting for this dude to die IN A FIRE (I can't believe I'm saying this), but he didn't and got a happily ever after with the other dude. What the actual f*ck.

There are two sinister plots with two sinister characters, one for each part of the book. I totally didn't understand what was the big deal, but I'm probably stupid or maybe WHORE. Anyway, both sinister characters got cleanly and easily killed off with a knife, which in my opinion could have been done much earlier in the story, or maybe even before the story began. As for the blurb about "the intricate high society of 1870s Brussels", the high society in this book is about as intricate as a spittoon.

The style was sort of interesting but painfully ponderous.

Why did I read it? Because it had a brothel in it. I'll read about anything that has a brothel in it. But it took me over three months!

Megan says

(Re-posted from <http://theturnedbrain.blogspot.com>)

How did I even end up with this book? Do you know what it's about? Puppets. Puppets! Fucking puppets man. I hate puppets. The creep me the hell out. And 'Under the Poppy' is just crammed full of them. In the literal sense, in that there is traveling genius puppeteer Istvan who has created and stolen a whole troupe of puppets with which he performs well received (and oft times risqué) shows all across 1800s Europe. But also in the metaphorical sense, in that Koja spends a lot of time examining who controls a mans strings, and what lengths one must go to cut them.

And it's not just the puppets. This book? Is literary fiction. Do you see me reading literary fiction? No. I read about space ships and swords and post apocalyptic landscapes. And this book? Has none of those things. There's nothing speculative at all, it's not like, say, 'The Book Thief' where on the one hand it's all literary but on the other hand it's narrated by death, no, everything in 'Under the Poppy' is as it seems. (Except for Istvan's creepy ass fucking puppets).

Again I ask, how did I end up with this puppet filled tome of magic-less literature? Actually, no, that's not the right question. The right question how, given the abundance of puppets and lack of dragons, did I come to love this book so much? Because guys, seriously, I loved this book.

It barely even has a plot for crying out loud! Well, no, actually I think it does have a plot, I think it's just that I wasn't quite smart enough to follow it. Or maybe I was too distracted by the decadent prose to keep track of it? Ok, so, we're in a brothel in the year eighteen something or other, somewhere in Europe, and there's some sort of war going on. Rupert and Decca are the powners of said brothel, and it's all business as usual until Decca's brother Istvan (and his puppets) show up out of the blue. It turns out Dia is in love with Rupert, but Rupert loves Istvan, and Istvan loves Rupert too except that they've been parted for reasons most mysterious... Also they need to figure out a way to keep the brothel safe from the encroaching war.

At any given point in this book I was never entirely sure what was going in. There were a great many political machinations, and there were a bunch of flashbacks to Rupert, Decca and Istvan's childhoods as Oliver Twist-esque street urchins and then, just when I thought maybe I was getting the hang of it, the first half ends and the second half is basically a sequel set years in the future. Actually this second half was a lot easier for me to follow, and I don't know if was written to be so, or if I was just settling into the unique grove of Koja's prose.

In any case, it never really mattered to me that I was always a little lost. This book reminded me of a modernist painting, wherein the artist suggests what the subject is without ever actually coming out and painting. Koja hands nothing to the reader. She revels in the details, the smells and sounds of her European setting, and it's from this that our understanding of what's going on is formed. Each sentence is like a rich desert, layered and beautiful, and I don't think I've ever enjoyed a book so much on a purely mechanical level.

The theme of masters and puppets is always at play in the book, although never obtrusively. I found that I didn't notice it so much as I was reading, but after I was done I find myself thinking about what Koja was saying a lot. Who is the master of who, indeed.

Really there is nothing I didn't love about this book. The ending was perfect and bittersweet, the characters

to a one were exquisitely crafted, and the dialogue was a delight to read. It had that witty nature to it that only books set in bygone centuries seem to be able to get away with, like a well crafted dance that we've forgotten the steps to. Plus, Istvan and Rupert! Talk about your epic romance. Seriously.

What else can I say, but don't let the disturbing puppets keep you from this truly amazing book.

L says

This book is problematic. Largely because had it ended at part one, I would've enthusiastically called it one of the best of the year. However, it drags on for an another agonizing part, so that diminished my love for it greatly.

OK, there is a lot of good here. These are some of the most fascinating characters I've come across, and the love affair between Istvan and Rupert is a stereotype defying, raw, beautiful thing. The style is a very original, very thick and in a sense, flashy and at points jerky. It fits the subject matter well.

However, after they actually leave The Poppy, nothing happens for an excruciatingly long time. Boring characters are introduced, a new love triangle with entirely too much in common with the first. Plus, her style seemed more confusing near the end? Like, I had to go reread parts to figure out whose POV I was reading again. Plus, with the new characters, she seemed to try and fit too many POVs in one part, which again would have me backtracking and frowning.

By the time the ending comes around, I was frowning at motivations and barely cared when I had been so riveted in the beginning and just wanted the thing to be over.

The book would've been far better if a hundred or so pages were cut. The whole Blackbird section was dull and a mess, and basically ruined everything I loved to begin with about the book. I wish I could recommend this book, as it had some truly good writing and original, stand out characters, but I can't.

Side note: what happened to Decca? It was implied she'd probably die horribly staying in a war zone, but the last scene we see she was alive and apparently whoring herself out to the general, and then, nothing. I assume she died or something, but to leave off at that is tacky. She always seemed really extraneous to the story, though. If you took her out of the story, you wouldn't be missing much, except some angst and the device which was used to get Rupert and Istvan back together.

Christy B says

Gosh, I just loved this book. I loved it so much that I've been putting off writing a review because I don't know if I can do the book any justice, but I must write something about it to recommend it to folks!

Under the Poppy is a wonderfully beautiful, dark, lush neo-Victorian novel set during the 1870s. First, in a brothel, and then in Brussels. We meet the owners of the brothel Under the Poppy: Decca and Rupert, and then Decca's half-brother Istvan shows up. Istvan is a fantastic character, for he is a master puppeteer, and the puppets are what made this story unique.

You see, to Istvan, his puppets are his family, he sees them as people, and he has a great talent of making

them come alive. He has been all over Europe showing people of the upper class his talent, but something brings him to the Poppy. Part of that something is a secret and part of it is Rupert.

At the Poppy, Istvan incorporates his puppets into the half-arsed stage show the brothel likes to put on. After a while, with a war coming, the members of the Poppy leave and scatter all over Europe. Decca decides to stay at the Poppy. Istvan, Rupert and one of the prostitutes – who has sort of become Istvan's apprentice – Lucy end up in Brussels.

But a secret follows them and it and temptation threatens to tear Rupert and Istvan apart.

Under the Poppy is my kind of novel. It is a pure character driven story. The first half of the story moves slow, because everyone is moving cautiously and people are tense. However, during the second half, the story picks up a bit because more things are happening at once. I could not read fast enough, but I also wanted to savor the beautiful writing.

The writing was so intricate and gorgeous. Sometimes I went back to read over a section because I wanted to make sure I caught everything, but sometimes I went back just to reread the words again and again.

Sidenote: **Under the Poppy** is currently being developed as a stage show, set to debut in 2011. I have to admit, I geeked out when I heard that. This would be amazing on the stage!

Visit <http://www.underthepoppy.com/> to learn more and watch the book trailer!

j says

Please enjoy the second installment in the new series, *Stefon on Literature*. Take it away, Stefon!

It's the 1870s, and Brussels' hottest brothel is Under the Poppy. Club owners Decca and Rupert have thought of everything: opium-addicted whores on swings, rent boys in costume, mute piano players, unrequited gay love, horny Gepettos...

I'm sorry, Stefon, horny Gepettos?

You know that thing where a master puppeteer uses his skills to create puppets so lifelike that a prostitute can't tell they aren't human even when one of them is fisting her?

No, Stefon, I don't believe that's a thing.

Well it is, Seth Meyers. Under the Poppy mastermind Kathe Koja has crammed everything into this 360 page space: suspicious army men, neck murders, multiple point-of-view characters contrasted with omniscient POV. But I like things tight, Seth Myers, and Under the Poppy is not tight. It is very pretty and enjoyable at the beginning, but it gets looser and more boring as you go along, like a McDonald's Shake Ass.

Wait, Stefon, McDonald's Shake Ass?

You know that thing where you keep taking the straw out of your McDonald's shake cup to lick it and eventually the opening in the plastic gets all big? It's that but instead of a shake...

Stefon, that is *definitely not a thing*.

Oh Seth, I could teach you so many things.

Bookventures Book Club says

Am a virgin when it comes to novels by Kathe Koja. When i first received my copy of Under the Poppy, i thought that this was Koja's debut. After doing a bit of research (a.k.a google), i found out that the author has written quite a few other books including The Cipher and YA novels such as Budda Boy and Going Under. The most amazing part of my research was finding out that some of the author's books were considered for film or the theater. In fact Under the Poppy (which by the way is being released on November 9th) is one such novel that is being adapted for theater production. If this wasn't an indicator of the author's literary prowess then the rave reviews for her other books certainly tipped me over the edge.

So now that i have set the stage for this novel, let me delve in by saying Under the Poppy is a story unlike anything you have ever read. Its a historical fiction that reads like a drama complete with all of the sophisticated prose reminiscent of Shakespeare. I loved the fact that after reading a sentence i sometimes paused to think about the subliminal messages in it. The setting is 1800s Brussels and while i didn't so much get a feel for the location, i did however enjoy all of the juicy drama that took place within and surrounding The Poppy.

There is a large amount of sex in the story (and it comes with the territory since The Poppy is a unique brothel). Sex between men and women, men and men, men, women and puppets, women and puppets. If you get alarmed at this point, don't. The scenes are all tastefully done and the author sticks to the time period so words that would usually make us blush when said out loud are actually written in code. Puppets are also a huge feature in the story and i found at times they were juxtapose to their human counterparts to show how free will is sometimes flung out the window and we are subsequently at the mercy of other forces.

Readers will really enjoy the characters in this story. Throughout the book you are exposed to several characters who at times play supporting as well as lead roles. The story really develops by way of alternating person views and we get an insight into each character when the author switches to their point of view. I was at a disadvantage with this book since i read it mostly on my way to work and i had to continuously come back to the story. As a result of that i missed out on the effect of really absorbing the story. But i have no doubt that you guys will have a totally differently and favourable experience with Under the Poppy.

Juushika says

In a historical city that could be 1870s Brussels stands *Under the Poppy*, a brothel with a flair for the theatrical, run by hard-edged Decca and stoic Rupert. But the unexpected arrival of Decca's brother Istvan, with his puppet troupe and tidings of war, brings unreset and change to the Poppy: the intrigues of politics and murder, hearts broken and won. *Under the Poppy* is a stylistic *tour de force* oftentimes hampered by that same strong style. A fantasy of manners in the way of Kushner's *Swordspoint*, but with a distinctive dark bend and lush aesthetic, it's strongly reminiscent of Robins's *Maledicte*. Combined with the book's theatrical inclinations—and puppetry and theatre are omnipresent—its style may inspire love and hate in equal measure: it holds no middle ground. Koja has an intense, terse voice which brings her book to life, embodying the unrelenting conflict and strange arts that fill it, and that style is often beautiful, but as faithful as Koja is to it it's never wholly natural or immersive. Combined with the convoluted machinations of a fantasy of manners and the many names used by some characters, this can make *Under the Poppy* hard to follow. Such a lush, complex world invites total immersion, and so it's a pity that the otherwise intriguing style holds the book at a remove.

On a personal note, *Under the Poppy* is so much my sort of book that I find it difficult to attempt the pseudo-objectivity that I try to maintain in my reviews. The puppetry wasn't to my taste, and it may not quite be the book that I would write myself, but it's a story I understand well. For better and worse the characters could easily have been residents of my id and I was able to anticipate all the plot twists and character interactions—and while such literary wish fulfillment was initially a delight, it ultimately dulled my enjoyment: reading the events that had already played out in my head felt redundant. I want to own *Under the Poppy* (despite the typos that plague this small-press book), because in many ways it's exactly the book for me and I think that revisiting it when familiar with, and so more comfortable with, its style and familiar with, and so not hoping for the unexpected from, its plot will allow me to revel in that. I find it hard to recommend it to others not because it's not good, but because of my lack of objectivity. For what it's worth, while no book is for everyone this book has a particularly limited, peculiar audience—but that audience, those in search of a dense dark world of prostitution emotional and physical, playacting on the stage and off, violence in politics and in love, where no quarter is given to character or to reader, may do well to pick up this book. It is not without flaws, but it is wholly, unapologetically, beautifully itself.

Mike says

I recommended FSG try to acquire this lurid and powerful novel; their loss is Small Beer's gain. Beautiful cover, too.

Nikki says

Full disclosure: I only read just over half of *Under the Poppy*. What I did read was interesting, but I couldn't get into it -- I was reading to finish it, not to enjoy it, which is the point at which I'm trying to teach myself to stop reading (unless I need to read it for some academic purpose). Supposedly, according to reviews, the second half is great, but I am really not in the mood right now. I'm not going to donate my copy or give it away -- for one thing, it was a gift from my girlfriend -- but I'm not going to finish it for now, either. Maybe when I have more time and energy to devote to it.

What I did read of it was rich, detailed, slipping in and out of the minds of various characters. It's

atmospheric, wonderfully so -- but to me it felt all atmosphere and no substance, and very little truly happening. I *wanted* to love Istvan and Rupert, but felt shut out by them -- I identified perhaps the most with Decca, in that respect! -- and didn't feel caught up in their world, at all. And it's not as though Decca is easy to love. The easiest ways in seem to be Lucy and Jonathan, but there isn't much of the latter...

The narration doesn't help: it isn't easy to read, the style, not quite conventional. It takes a while to pick up the signifiers, what is flashback and what is real, and sometimes what exactly is being said, and by whom. Parts of it are third person (omniscient?) and parts are first person, which gives it all sorts of different flavours, but... still. I don't feel closer to any one character, through that.

And, in the end, very little happens in that first half.

I am willing to give this book more of a chance -- I know there's something in here that will catch my full attention, I'm sure there must be -- but not when I'm so busy.

Orrin Grey says

I'm a bit surprised, I'll admit, to be giving this such a high rating. There's no speculative elements, not that I *need* speculative elements, but these days I don't read much that doesn't have them. Still and all, though, this was one of the best books I read all year. I absolutely loved it. I loved the style, the characters, the ending, and everything.

I didn't really expect to. To be honest, love triangles and brothels, I dunno, it sounded like something that could get on my bad side pretty quickly. It was the puppet angle that pulled me in, and that part was pretty great, but really just... I really loved this book.

Kelly says

Ambivalent is how I feel about this book. One week after I finished it, I am finally writing a review. I needed this time to ponder the book, reread parts, and finally read reviews by others. Alas, despite these measures, I still feel uncertain about the contradictions the book instills in me.

First, the book received some acclaim (and even an award) because it deals with homosexual love, but I feel that the book only lightly touches upon this because the author is not comfortable enough (or brave enough?) to truly explore this. What I mean by this is that the author has no problem providing lurid descriptions of heterosexual activity in the brothel, but she skims the homosexual interactions. I don't want to read specific descriptions, but why would she not treat both the same? I appreciate that the first half of the book is set in the brothel and the second half in more cultured society so that may contribute to the "tamer" sexual references (because the author is kinder to Lucy's interactions in the second half of the book as well).

Second, I detest the use of maybe written as "may be" every time it is used. It irritated me. I also found the writing style irritating - the author was simply trying too hard to do something different. The stream of consciousness attempts and italics (sometimes) for conversation and flip flopping from person to person and topic to topic were too much. She already employed multiple narrators, and these other affectations distracted me so that I wasn't always focused on the plot. And yet, I kept reading because the writing was not unlike a scab that you pick at even though you know you should not.

Third, the plot a simple story really - Rupert loves Istvan, and Istvan's sister Decca loves Rupert, and Istvan loves Rupert, but the boys (for they are young when they fight) are separated by a ridiculously simple argument and Rupert and Istvan end up running a brothel together. The brothel tries to raise itself above its station by offering nightly cabaret style plays. Hmm... I think Moulin Rouge (and others) have already done this. When the men flee (after a reconciliation and murder/death) with Lucy, they recreate themselves (a bit) in Europe only to have their past catch up with them.

Fourth, the author uses Istvan's attachment to his puppets to such an extent that it's actually creepy. Yes, she wants us to all realize that we are all puppets to some extent and it's the puller of the strings who is really in charge. There are some good lines in the book that provide these insights, but I don't think it was worth reading 300+ pages to glean those few lines. And, how does the book end? Why with a wedding of course - let's wrap everything up nicely and make everyone happy.

Finally, I really did want to like this book. I really did. I like the idea of the book - we do what we do to survive; we all let love ruin us a bit; life is not fair; people with money and means get away with things they should not; and the Victorian Era was full of vulgar, cruel, and insidious people. But the book did not paint the picture well for me. Then again, may be (spelled this way on purpose) I'm not sophisticated enough to appreciate this type of book.
