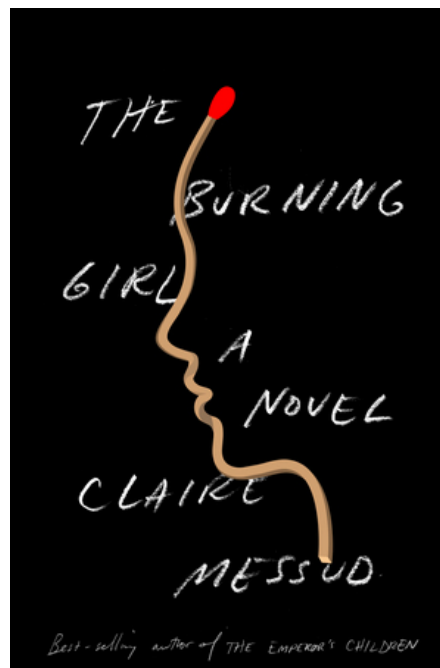




The Burning Girl

Claire Messud

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The Burning Girl Claire Messud

A bracing, hypnotic, coming-of-age story about the bond of best friends, from the *New York Times* best-selling author of *The Emperor's Children*.

Julia and Cassie have been friends since nursery school. They have shared everything, including their desire to escape the stifling limitations of their birthplace, the quiet town of Royston, Massachusetts. But as the two girls enter adolescence, their paths diverge and Cassie sets out on a journey that will put her life in danger and shatter her oldest friendship.

Claire Messud, one of our finest novelists, is as accomplished at weaving a compelling fictional world as she is at asking the big questions: To what extent can we know ourselves and others? What are the stories we create to comprehend our lives and relationships? Brilliantly mixing fable and coming-of-age tale, *The Burning Girl* gets to the heart of these matters in an absolutely irresistible way.

The Burning Girl Details

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Author : Claire Messud

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From Reader Review The Burning Girl for online ebook

Elyse says

"Oh brother"....

"I try to imagine feeling lonely and the way she felt lonely, then. I'm not sure I can do that. I'm a dog and she was a cat: I slobbery and keen; she, self-contained and ultimately private. For so many years it didn't matter; but then she was alone. In her feline nature, and lonely. I should have been able to sense how it was. She was too proud to tell me, or Peter for that matter; and I was too proud and too wounded to look".

Like I said.... "oh brother"! The above excerpt is just not the type of writing I can read without rolling my eyes --turning into a teenager here myself - and not proud of it.

With 4 wonderful books about friendship from early childhood into adulthood--with all of the many things that can happen...by Elena Ferrante... Claire Messud took a huge risk writing about a coming-of-age -girl's friendship - gone astray- novel.

Given Claire Messud - herself is such a wonderful writer - I thought it was possible her risk would pay off....

Then I saw Bonnie's early review- way back -her 2 star review (she read an early reader ARC).... I was worried, but still hopeful and pre-ordered this book.

Its very hard to believe Claire Messud wrote this. The ending had some depth - but I felt there was a stronger story to tell between the mothers & daughters than the girls relationship. There friendship was too weak to begin with. Comparing each other to cats and dogs? That's reaching!!!

2 stars

Bonnie Brody says

I really anticipated this new novel by Claire Messed. Her last book, 'The Woman Upstairs', was an inimitable character study of two female artists and a horrific act of betrayal. I have found her to be a writer of substance and perspicacity. However, this book didn't live up to my expectations.

Cassie and Julia meet when they are in pre-school and remain very close until junior high, at which time their paths diverge. The novel explores their friendship, especially the very close connection that Julia feels to Cassie. They come from different backgrounds and their family values are not always congruent. The book follows their games, imaginative play and Julia's grief as Cassie begins to drift away from her.

What bothered me most was that so many things were hinted at but there was no closure. The novel explores a certain darkness and intensity in Cassie's life, especially her lifelong desire to find out who her father was and her tendency towards risky behaviors. However, the book just drifts along and as I waited for something to unfold that would grab me, I kept waiting. There are no epiphanies and there are no sharp turns. It felt more like a writing exercise than a novel.

Bill Kupersmith says

Set in a quiet town north of Boston, *The Burning Girl* is a bittersweet story of transition from childhood to adolescence. Cassie & Julia (Juju) have been friends since preschool - by ninth grade they'll be acquaintances. Actually it's not unusual to get a whole bunch of new friends in high school (I did). As I remarked of Megan Abbott's *Dare Me*, it's a bit odd in mid-teens to have the same BF you had in 2nd grade. Still, I found this such a moving story of a friendship seen from the POV of the one who gets dumped. (Ironically, the friend of superior social & educational standing.) It's painful to watch Cassie & Juju become estranged. The earlier scenes of the friendship, especially the discovery of the abandoned asylum which becomes the girls' imaginary castle, were so affecting. The section in which Cassie takes off for Maine in search of her father was heart wrenching. If a girl as courageous & attractive as Cassie came into my life insisting I was her dad, I think I'd be tempted to accept the honor whatever the reality. Tho' the bitter outweighed the sweet in this story, I'm consoled by the thought that it ends with Julia but 17. The girls are still at a very early stage in their formation & there's a whole lifetime available for them to renew their relationship. This book is a little too slight for the whole five stars, but what's there is so poignant.

Jenna says

The best book I've read in 2017 so far.

Julie and Cassie have been friends since nursery school and shared everything, but as they enter adolescence, their paths diverge and Cassie sets out on a journey that will put her life in danger and shatter their friendship.

Julie narrates this story, letting you, the reader, know that what she is telling you is a terrible secret. She is desperate to help Cassie even as she pulls away from her, but in trying to save her she may betray her in the most intimate way possible.

This book is simple in its appearance – it's plot, while gripping, is a tale we've heard before - but you'll find layers of complexity that speak to several vital questions: how well can we really know another person, even our closest friends; how we construct stories about ours and others' lives – stories that can smother and destroy; and – incredibly important for our times - how we teach young women to be afraid.

This book is hypnotic, evocative, and so incredibly insightful into the fact that growing up and being a girl is about learning to be afraid and the fact that you come to know, in a way you don't as a kid, that your body is vulnerable, imperfectly fortified – that it's both precious and totally dispensable, depending on whom you encounter.

Linda says

Life seems to distance even the most solid of friendships.

We all remember the ebb and flow of childhood memories. That friend. That one friend who was so aligned in our thoughts from morning until night and beyond. That person who breathed in every ounce of our persona and kept secrets as still as death.

Julia and Cassie were bonded together since they were very small children living in the town of Royston, Massachusetts. Royston, never highlighted on anyone's travel map, encompassed its community in small town living and small town mentalities. A good time was spent trying out nail polish at the Rite Aid drug

store or watching storefronts close up on Main Street.

Although tightly wound in friendship, Julia and Cassie are far different in their appearances, their dreams, and their family backgrounds. Julia's mother writes for magazines and her father is a dentist with his office a few feet from their home. Cassie's mom is a hospice nurse who drops Cassie off every day at Julia's house as she rushes to work. Cassie's father supposedly died when she was a baby. He is an elusive presence in Cassie's life and one that plays out throughout this story.

Claire Messud develops her storyline along the lines of an undying friendship that seems to breathe its last. The strength of the telling is in its early stages when the young girls find adventures in the out-of-bounds swimming hole and the boarded up asylum at the edge of town. They seem to fill the void for each other that exists in that uncertain rough terrain of early adolescence. Where one steps low the other braces for the fall.

As time passes, the girls eventually are separated into different sub-groups of school classes, friend choices, and questions of mistrust. They appear to drift in and out of each other's lives and stark differences in maturity start to rise. There doesn't seem to be that soft place to land anymore.

We, the readers, will take note of a deep transformation in the character of Cassie. There is a dark, smouldering ember of something burning away inside of her that Julia no longer recognizes. And the question becomes more pronounced: Do we yet have an impact on the ties that bind us together?

Although a fine read by Messud, I felt caught up by an overabundance of detail at the beginning of the story, line by line. Long ramblings needed pause. As the story progressed, this was replaced by a somewhat elusive style of innuendo and brief suggestions. Cassie was, indeed, coming undone without the tried-and-true safety net that we all beg to be surrounded in. A slamming of a vehicle door (which you will notice at the end) is a cold reality. And do we have the opportunity to pick up cards after the ones we've been dealt?

I received a copy of The Burning Girl through Goodreads for an honest review. My thanks to W.W. Norton & Company and to Claire Messud for the opportunity.

Dianne says

I loooove Claire Messud's writing! This short novel is about two girls, Julia and Cassie, who have been best friends since nursery school. As they enter their pre-teen years, the friendship becomes fractured and the girls' paths begin to diverge. The narrator, Julia, is the girl from the stable two-parent home, the good student, the cautious introvert. Cassie is the fragile girl from the wrong side of the tracks, the girl who has a perpetual dark cloud following her every move and who seems to be headed nowhere fast. I thought the girls' tangled bond was very relatable and the writing stellar.

The first three quarters of the book was mesmerizing. Then Messud started in with the "woo-woo" philosophical stuff and lost me. I just wanted to know what happened to the girls, you know?

At the end of the day, I always go for the writing over the story, so upping this 3.75 story to a 4.

Recommended for fans of Messud.

Ron Charles says

Claire Messud's slim novel "The Burning Girl" is a kind of teen companion to "The Woman Upstairs," her 2013 masterpiece about adult female friendship. It's flush with contemplation about the effects of time and class on young people's lives.

The narrator is a girl named Julia who's been best friends with Cassie since the beginning. "I can't remember a time when I didn't know her," Julia explains in the foreboding opening pages. "Both only children, we said that the other was the sister we never had." For years, the differences between their circumstances are invisible to them both, or so Julia imagines. It doesn't matter that she has a mother and a father, who make a nice living, while Cassie's mother is a widow struggling by on a hospice nurse's. . . .

To read the rest of this review, go to The Washington Post:
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/entert...>

Kasa Cotugno says

"Nobody cares about a happy ending when they care more about the story than the person." Well, I didn't care about either the story or the person by the time this prescient sentence played out.

Cesar says

2 stars

In hindsight, I should've listened more to the reviews from other people about this book. I have read books that have gotten mixed reviews and for the most part, I did like them while there were others I did not like.

However, I was not a fan of **The Burning Girl**.

When I first heard the premise for The Burning Girl, I was hoping it would be one of those books with a very complicated, if not, toxic friendship. If you guys know me, I am a huge **Megan Abbott** fan. Her books go well into detail about the complications of friendships between teenage girls. So, I thought The Burning Girl would have that.

Except I was wrong. Instead, I got a long-winded story about why Julia and Cassie stopped being friends. It wasn't anything complicated. They just stopped being friends and some things happened along the way. Very disappointing.

It happened before when I read **Girls on Fire** by Robin Wasserman. Both books I was disappointed in because of their lackluster plot and characters.

The Burning Girl is not a bad book, but there was a lot of flaws in the story.

I might as well start off with the negatives first.

For a short book, it felt long. It's only 247 pages but it read like I was reading a 400-page book sometimes. I have heard that Claire Messud's writing can be longwinded and her sentences are long. Notably, I saw the reviews from her other novel, **The Emperor's Children** saying it was longwinded as well. I now understand what they mean. There were many sentences that went on for too long describing a certain scene or even straying away from the story to describe something else. It took forever for the story to progress.

The characters themselves were not that interesting nor did they give off any shock value to the story. We get a hint of what Julia and Cassie are like but it's muddled down as the story progresses. Sure, Cassie gets into trouble but even then, her character didn't have much change. Both remained static up until the very end.

Sometimes, there were characters thrown into the story and were out in a matter of a couple of pages, as if they didn't have much of an impact on the story. Messud mentions them at one point and is forgotten in the next. To me, I didn't understand why she put them there if they were going to be discarded eventually. It didn't make much sense in the long run considering how short the story is.

The one major flaw I had with the story was how it was presented. Just by reading the synopsis, you would expect a story about a complicated and possibly toxic friendship. What you get instead is Julia telling word for word how their friendship ended without any major drama. Combine that with the writing format and you might as well be reading a textbook explaining the causes of WWII. Just one big explanation.

I was hoping for something good but got something bad.

The **one good thing** I will have to give credit for is how at some parts of the book, I was intrigued by the plot and I wanted to know what would happen. That itself prevented me from giving this a 1-star rating.

Verdict

The premise does seem interesting, but don't get your hopes up. What I got was a story with too many descriptions and long sentences, characters that didn't change for the good, a slow plot, and straightforward narrative with no drama. This is not a story of a complicated friendship. Which is sad because this story had all the ingredients to be a good story. Sadly, it was not.

Thanks for reading my review!

-Cesar

Trudie says

* 4.5 *

It's so so satisfying, finding yourself enjoying a book you never intended to read, by an author you had

decided was not for you. Its the joy of expectations surpassed. You feel ashamed of your haughty preconceptions based on friends middling reviews and the inexplicable 3.36 branding. Somewhere around the third paragraph all your resistance is broken down and you spend the entire novel ruminating on why you have never read Claire Messud before now.

The book is in three parts, in an interview with Messud she says

I think of the first as "Childhood" and the second almost as "Time Passes". You know like the middle section of "To the Lighthouse". And the third as, if not "Adulthood" then some version of it

Part One of this book has this beautiful elegiac, end of summer, end of a friendship feel to it that I haven't seen replicated so perfectly in a novel before. I related to these two girls on so many levels even though they are about to be teenagers circa 2013. The universality of that experience of transitioning from the freedom of childhood into a menacing and dimly understood adulthood was just so beautifully handled here.

I did think early on that this book was going to go in a certain direction and I am delighted it flirted with my expectations in that regard but ultimately left things unknowable.

I agree with Hannah Pittard in her analysis that

More than anything — more especially than a plot-driven novel — The Burning Girl strikes me as a highly refined rumination on girlhood

And therein might lie some of the disappointment with this book for some readers, who might be led to expect more of a girl goes missing type drama.

My only reasoning for not giving this the full 5-stars as I intended to do for most of the novel, was for some awkwardness in the story towards the end. The third-hand telling of Cassie's story (Cassie told Peter, who told it to Julia who tells it to us) is laborious to read and I did keep thinking how do we know all this is true ? and then I decided that was rather the point, but unfortunately it still made for some awkward passages.

It is quite illuminating to read various interviews with Claire Messud as she talks about gender-specific anxiety and I was impressed with how she managed to convey this in subtle and real ways in this novel without resorting to the acts of violence themselves. The menace is eluded to and it's up to the reader to decide how real it is. Which makes this book for me one to ponder over and eventually come back to for a reread.

This section is a fantastic example of some on point observations by Messud.

Sometimes I felt that growing up and being a girl was about learning to be afraid. Not paranoid, exactly, but always alert and aware, like checking out the exits in the movie theater or the fire escapes in a hotel. You came to know, in a way you hadn't as a kid, that the body you inhabited was vulnerable, imperfectly fortified. On TV, in the papers, in books and movies, it isn't ever men being raped or kidnapped or bludgeoned or dismembered or burned with acid. But in stories and crime shows and TV series and movies and in life, too, it's going on all the time, all around you. So you learn, in your mind, that your body needs to be protected. It's both precious and totally dispensable, depending on whom you encounter

Obviously, I loved this reading experience and I am so thrilled I still have more of Claire Messud's works to explore. I also learnt an important lesson - ignore GR average ratings ;)

(Ursula K La Guin writes a good review here in The Guardian).

Amanda NEVER MANDY says

****I received this book for free through Goodreads First Reads.****

Some memories have teeth.

People are quick to tell you all about the shock felt when life decides to change in the blink of an eye but fail to mention the burning sting of what the hell happened when you finally realize that life has been running a long con on you the whole damn time. While you were busy worrying over those “shocking” sudden changes, life was busy tweaking this that and the other, until what you know is no longer what you have and what you thought you wanted is no longer on the table.

This is the story of two girls that have a friendship that can rival any other. Bonded at the eye color blue, life sisters even though they aren’t from the same family tree. We are brought into the story by Miss Julia who introduces us to her friend Cassie by telling us about the best last summer that ever was (as each summer always is when you are young and living in the moment). All seems well until one minor shock reshapes a summer and opens the door to so much more.

I enjoyed the hell out of this book because of what it stirred up in my own personal memories. It perfectly captured that childlike innocence, memories of how things used to be when a day spent sitting in a tree house with your closest friends was all you lived for until...it just wasn’t. Here is where the memories with teeth and life’s slow con comes in to play. If I knew then what I know now I would have held tight to those fleeting moments that unfairly felt like I had an eternity to enjoy.

Well-written, emotionally packed story...**LOVED** this read.

Larry H says

I'm between 2.5 and 3 stars, so I'll round up.

The friendships we form when we are younger often have a profound effect on our lives, even into adulthood. And although I can't speak from experience, it's often been said that female friendships, particularly those forged during adolescence and the teenage years, can be tremendously intense, providing special memories and, in some cases, inflicting emotional pain.

Cassie and Julia have been friends for as long as they can remember—since nursery school. They've always been an inseparable part of each other's lives, and have shared their secrets, fears, desires, and dreams. The summer before seventh grade they spend volunteering at the local animal shelter, hiking in the woods outside their small Massachusetts town, and secretly visiting the abandoned asylum in the woods, imagining the lives of those imprisoned there.

But little by little, things change between Cassie and Julia that summer, and into the school year that followed, when the two are assigned to different academic levels, and Cassie makes new friends who encourage her to act in a more rebellious manner, and develop relationships with boys. Julia feels the loss of Cassie palpably and can't seem to figure out what went wrong, wishing that things could return to how they were before.

"It's a different story depending on where you start: who's good, who's bad, what it all means. Each of us shapes our stories so they make sense of who we think we are. I can begin when Cassie and I were best friends; or I can begin when we weren't anymore; or I can begin at the dark end and tell it all backward."

Even though they barely speak, Julia keeps tabs on Cassie through a mutual friend. She learns that Cassie's relationship with her mother has become tenuous since her mother found a boyfriend, a man who makes Cassie tremendously uncomfortable in her own home and who convinces her mother to become even more restrictive of Cassie's freedoms. And as her home life continues to deteriorate, Cassie leans on the one thing she has always depended on, the memories of her dead father, and even that doesn't provide the security it once did.

The Burning Girl is more than the exploration of how intensely an adolescent friendship can affect us throughout our lives, but it also is a reflection on how well we can truly know a person we have grown up and shared so much with. At the same time, this book shows the sometimes painful realization between daydreams and realities, and reminds us that sometimes we need to be saved even if we don't want to be.

While I like the way Claire Messud writes (and I'm a big fan of a number of her earlier books, including *When the World Was Steady*, *The Last Life*, and *The Emperor's Children*), this book really didn't wow me. I feel that this story has been told many times before.

I'm never particularly enamored of when crucial events in a book are relayed third-hand, that the protagonist told one person, who told the narrator, who then shared what they had learned. It often made me wonder whether the story was actually reliable, or whether there were threads I should doubt. I also tend to get frustrated when a book's plot is advanced more by conjecture and assumption than actually witnessing events taking place.

There are powerful moments of longing, emotion, and betrayal in *The Burning Girl*, but they weren't quite enough to generate a lot of passion. I also was thankful that Messud avoided taking the plot in one direction I feared she might.

Perhaps the fact that I never quite had a friendship like this (and I'm not a female) might have dulled the book's power for me, so if this sounds intriguing, I'd encourage you to pick this book up.

See all of my reviews at <http://itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blo....>

Jill says

The Burning Girl is a novel that never really catches fire. It's a fable-of-sorts of two young girls – Julia and Cassie – who were once “besties” in Roylton, Massachusetts, and who diverge on different paths as they enter an uncertain adolescence, driven by vastly different expectations.

It is those expectations that shape the destiny of these two girls: “You only see what you expect to see. Your brain lets the rest go.” Cassie, early on, is consigned to the ranks of the disappeared—“all those girls and women snatched by loners or neighbors, battered by fathers, dismembered by jilted lovers, raptured from the bike path or the shopping mall or the late-night bus stop to an invisible and unimagined and nonexistent hereafter...”

So yes, we, as readers, suspect early on that Cassie will end up being one of “those girls” while her friend Julia will thrive. As in many fables, there's a leering stepfather who may (or may not) be up to no good,

plenty of unsubstantiated rumors, and a constant yearning on Cassie's part for a father she never knew

Julia and Cassie are emblematic, and therefore, the book is really less about these girls and more about what it means to be a girl – growing up learning to be afraid, choosing to don a “poisoned cloak” that can kill rather than liberate, recognizing that at the end of the day, we may be powerless to save ourselves let alone each other. It's also about our yearning for a story with an arc – motives, climax, resolution—and what happens when a so-called victim doesn't fall into that tidy trajectory and strains against her own story.

I am not the kind of reader who needs or relies on a story arc, but still, I wanted something more. I've restlessly tried to explore what was missing for me, and I think it's the push-pull between the fable and more grounded elements of the story. The coming-of-age story – two girls who grow apart and embrace their individual destinies – is not unique; what is unique is how Ms. Messud works to universalize the story and provide it with resonating truths. Thanks to W.W. Norton for an early reading copy.

Dannii Elle says

I received a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review. Thank you to the author, Claire Messud, and the publisher, Fleet, for this opportunity.

Cassie and Julia were best friends. Past tense. Every one of their memories involved the other, but all that inexplicably changed. A rift formed between the two and neither could exactly place the moment it happened. The distance between them expanded as they grew, until passing greetings and fake smiles in the school corridor summed up the entirety of their interaction. But when Cassie needs help it seems Julia is the only know who knows how to save her. Whether Cassie wants to be saved is another question entirely, however.

Books focusing on the intricacies of teen girl friendships are my favourite type of stories. I find these topics infinitely compelling due to the complexity and intensity of emotion exhibited by the characters. This book was proof of that fact.

This tenuous friendship is viewed from Julia's perspectives and she recounts both their past shared memories and her current individual ones. To view the pair's once closeness in comparison to their current separate existences heightens the reader's understanding of all that has been lost. I think much of the book's emotion would have been absent if the reader had not been given the multiple chances to relive their lives through Julia's sequence of flashbacks. I also don't believe either character would have been so rounded and authentic, as they each worked to create each other, in the way only the best of friendships can do.

The book circled itself in a suspenseful chain of events that led to the final climatic scene. Everything I feared would transpire almost did and Messud kept me guessing about how the novel would actually conclude right up until the moment it actually did. The ending was the novel's crowing glory and incorporated all the seemingly unrelated stories and memories into one cohesive and thrilling whole.

Blair says

Oh, I just ate this up, I wish it had been two, three, four times longer. In lesser hands it could so easily have been a 'so what?' book – two teenage girls fall out, one of them has a more fraught family situation than the other – so what? More than anything else I have read this year, *The Burning Girl* demonstrates how effortlessly a brilliant writer can elevate tired subject matter.

Of all the books I had on my wishlist for the second half of 2017, *The Burning Girl* was the one I regarded with the greatest amount of trepidation. As much as Messud's *The Woman Upstairs* got under my skin, the plot of this one – two teen girls, a small town, the eruption of adolescence, a friendship lost – didn't exactly bode well. After disliking or abandoning a clutch of them, I've been making efforts to avoid these 'girls gone wild' novels; they've become a bit of a trend, perhaps not as ubiquitous as the *Gone* and *Train* type of Girls but equally profuse and patchy. When I read Beryl Bainbridge's 1972 novel *Harriet Said...* at the beginning of the year, I was reminded (yes, I am quoting myself here, sorry) 'how few adult authors are capable of capturing the nuances of girlhood, and how exhilarating it is when someone gets it right'.

Messud tells her characters' story in flashback, but Julia Robinson isn't an adult – she's seventeen years old, about to decide which college she wants to go to, just a couple of years removed from the events she describes. This makes her raw anguish, the way she is still picking over the bones of her lost friendship with mercurial Cassie Burnes, all too real. At the same time, it strips the story of any cheap nostalgic power. These girls' youth is one of Katy Perry songs and YouTube tutorials; the most retro detail is Cassie being the only person in her family to own a smartphone. Presumably, there's a tendency for authors to frame these girlhood tales within an older character's perspective to avoid them being interpreted as stories *for* teenagers. There's no danger of that here – the quality of Messud's writing and the depth of her character-building tells you all you need to know.

There is no preamble, no exposition. We're straight into Julia's point of view, a vivid account of her friendship with Cassie during that coming-of-age period between the beginning and middle of their teens, a time in which the girls go from playing make-believe games in an abandoned house (and what an extraordinarily evocative scene that is!) to growing apart amid the trappings of nascent adulthood: boys, parties and intricate social politics. While Julia and Cassie's relationship takes centre stage, this is just as much a story about mothers and daughters. Julia comes from a liberal yet deeply caring family, and is close to her mother, a journalist. Cassie's relationship with her nurse mom Bev is more complicated: a tight bond, but also an unhealthily codependent one. When Bev begins dating a God-fearing doctor named Anders Shute, Cassie withdraws, becomes depressed and erratic. At the same time, the story of Cassie's late father – which she has embellished until it has reached the status of personal legend – seems to unravel.

It's part and parcel of being a teenager that inconsequential things seem huge while events that may be life-changing barely register, at least not immediately. Messud knows this, and she depicts it with the dexterity of a true master. This book is full of darkness and foreboding but it glimmers with the impermanence of youth – perhaps the most terrifying element of the story is that it is not over, yet this is the exact same thing that offers the most hope. *The Burning Girl* possesses an irresistible momentum, delightful and sickening at the same time, that kept me glued to it – just one more page, and another, and another, until I'd burned (ha) through it before I knew it. It is just glorious.

I received an advance review copy of The Burning Girl from the publisher through Edelweiss.

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