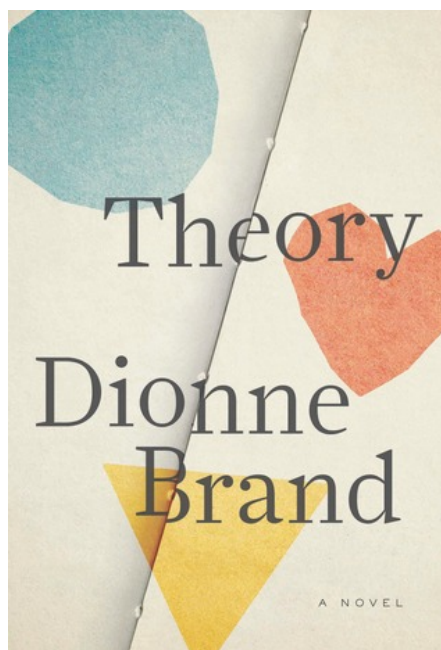




Theory

Dionne Brand

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A smart, sensual and witty novel about what happens when love and intellect are set on a collision course. This compact tour de force affirms Dionne Brand's place as one of Canada's most dazzling and influential artists.

Theory begins as its narrator sets out, like many a graduate student, to write a wildly ambitious thesis on the past, present, and future of art, culture, race, gender, class, and politics--a revolutionary work that its author believes will synthesize and thereby transform the world.

While our narrator tries to complete this magnum opus, three lovers enter the story, one after the other, each transforming the endeavour: first, there is beautiful and sensual Selah, who scoffs at the narrator's constant tinkering with academic abstractions; then altruistic and passionate Yara, who rescues every lost soul who crosses her path; and finally, spiritual occultist Odalys, who values magic and superstition over the heady intellectual and cultural circles the narrator aspires to inhabit. Each galvanizing love affair (representing, in turn, the heart, the head, and the spirit) upends and reorients the narrator's life and, inevitably, requires an overhaul of the ever larger and more unwieldy dissertation, with results both humorous and poignant.

By effortlessly telling this short, intense tale in the voice of an unnamed, ungendered (and brilliantly unreliable) narrator, Dionne Brand makes a bold statement not only about love and personhood, but about race and gender--and what can and cannot be articulated in prose when the forces that inhabit the space between words are greater than words themselves.

A gorgeous, profoundly moving, word- and note-perfect novel of ideas that only a great artist at the height of her powers could write.

Theory Details

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Author : Dionne Brand

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Krystal says

Dionne Brand impresses with a novel that brilliantly navigates the intersections of academia, love, race, gender, etc!

David Towler says

UTTER CRAP. Self indulged self-flagellating nonsense about more damaged people leading damaged lives and nattering on about nonsense like how they fell in love with each other's asses and left their love on the floor for people to walk through. This is pure 'chick-flick' kind of fare and if the ladies like it then good for them. I hated every word. Read only as far as the end of the first chapter for our bookclub and then gave up and deleted it from my kindle. TOTAL waste of whatever the hell I paid for the damned thing. Utterly DIRE and almost unreadable self-indulgent total nonsense. Don't waste your time. I haven't hated a book this much in EONS. I wouldn't touch another Brand book if you paid me - in bullion studded with diamonds.

Jen Bober says

Theory follows a narrator on their journey to write a thesis that explores their relationship history. Three different relationships are brought up that appear to follow the heart, the head and the spirit as each relationship is very different and alters the narrator in a distinct way. As the narrator tries to complete their thesis we see the crossover between culture, race, gender, class and politics. I struggled to really follow the point of the book and did not gain anything profound from it. I did however enjoy how the narrator did not have a name or gender throughout. I think that was a really great statement. I have never read a book that was written like this and enjoyed how my mind wandered back and forth between genders. Thank you to Netgalley for a free preview copy.

Sarah says

I mean it's an interesting idea, but it went right over my head for the most part. I didn't care about any of the characters- they all seemed just like metaphors for big ideas and ramblings. This felt like reading a really pretentious essay where the author just tries to use every big word they know. Meh

Vicki says

4 1/2 stars

Theory is both witty and wistful. Academic Teoria *does* live too much in her head, and her attempts and those of her lovers to draw her out of her labyrinth of words and paper are simultaneously captivating and frustrating.

"You're wasting all your light," Teoria's wife Odalys observes memorably.

"None of us are who we become," Teoria finally understands in this thorny book's surprisingly moving conclusion.

Kathleen says

The author never gives the reader a reason to care about any of these characters, making the narratives about them tedious and boring. I couldn't make it past halfway.

Shivaneer Ramlochan says

Review forthcoming!

ken says

Review @ bookhermit!

Krista says

I think of Selah and Yara and Odalys now, not as hindrances, not even as transit points to myself or as the lessons of my life – but as the life itself, the theory of my life. They and I are not made of nothingness. They've gone on in their own narratives. I've gone on in mine. I must sit in the knowledge of them; we remain adjacent. They've given me, in part, material for a lifetime of theory, but I can't live in the prosthetic. They are not my arms, not my body, nor my head, not even my imagination – they escape and exceed me and I am left with me.

Theory begins with a footnote about a visit from the narrator's brother, who is horrified by his (unnamed and ungendered) sibling's living conditions. The apartment that the brother steps into, for the first time in years, is a hoarder's paradise of books and papers – some ripped or crumpled; none of which the narrator is willing to part with – and we soon learn that all of this clutter represents every thought or theory that the narrator has written down over the course of the fourteen or so years that they have been working on a PhD dissertation. Nearing forty and freshly invigorated to assemble all of this brilliance into a 700 page thesis (with 2100 pages remaining for a furtherance of their theories), the narrator begins by considering the three lovers that they have had throughout the dissertation writing process. These three women – Selah, Yara, and Odalys – represent body, mind, and spirit, and as the narrator's doctoral focus is a radical evaluation of gender and racial norms, every relationship is analysed through these lenses. There is a skewering of academia (and blame assigned to those self-proclaimed progressives who have benefited from and perpetuate the elitist patriarchal system) and a sympathetic look at a person who aspires to live in the mind but who keeps being drawn back into the world of others. Because Dionne Brand is a celebrated poet, it's her words and phrasing that most intrigued me here, and as a result, I'm going to quote her at length to give a real picture of what this book is like.

The first section is named for Selah – a woman who is the embodiment of beauty and voluptuousness, and whom the narrator loves but doesn't engage with intellectually; Selah is a nice distraction during the early and productive days of dissertation writing:

Back to the body as intelligence: the body is, after all, a living organism – with its own intention, separate from the parsed out, pored over intentions that one can say come from the mind. The mind's interpretation of the body is irrelevant. The body pursues its own needs and its own desires with fibre optic precision not even yet detailed by scientists. Selah's body, for example, had decided on cinnamon, and it has, to my way of thinking, synthesized all of the atmosphere around it to smell of cinnamon. Or let me withdraw that previous statement. Perhaps it is my body, my olfactory nerve, that decided on cinnamon at the appearance of Selah, and so it collected the smell of cinnamon around the presence of Selah. On the other hand, there might be a third theory unknown to both Selah and me that accounts for the cinnamon. Whatever the truth of this, Selah smelled like cinnamon.

The second section is for Yara – an activist artist who collects hopeless stray people, and who is always challenging the narrator to join her revolutions:

I couldn't bind Yara to the normative, to an uncritical monogamy, a monogamy unexamined and taken for granted. And I couldn't deny Yara the full and true expression of her sexuality, especially on the basis of an uncritical acceptance of the norm. The normative was a doldrum we had all been lured into by the forces of capital, et cetera. This is what I knew and felt, even as I also felt a certain sting of jealousy and loss whenever one of those people showed up with Yara. In my analysis this "sting" was a vestigial emotion that probably predated capital, or perhaps had its root in capital, but was nevertheless what remained of different social relations and circumstances. My theory of myself is that any idea I can understand – that is, if it can be explained along ethical and moral lines as essentially unharmed, and as contributing to my intellectual life, my growth as a human being – I will embrace. And who was I, my theory theorized, who was I to claim hegemony over Yara's body? I've never wanted control of anyone, least of all their body. And least of all Yara's. Yara. I wanted Yara to have all she wanted.

The third section is for Odalys – a Colombian woman who believes in all manner of magic, spells, and spiritual ritual. Although they wouldn't seem to have much in common, the narrator and Odalys are satisfied seeing each other once a week:

Let me say from the outset I loved Odalys' body the way one loves a theory. Not, say, the theory of relativity – that would be too simple and unitary, I suggest. And besides, I know nothing of science. A theory such as the theory of language is more the theory that comes to mind. How it is acquired and why certain sounds occur in certain regions; the uses of the tongue, et cetera. A theory such as one suggested by Chomsky's works might best describe my fascination. To be more precise, it wasn't Odalys' body but the sense of Odalys' body, like a universal weight in the world. Perhaps, perhaps it was the weight of her presence, the "mental grammar". Sometimes I think I created Odalys out of what I needed, and what I needed was a balancing weight to my theories – some presence that would deny or counter those theories through embodiment.

The final section is called Teoria/Theory (“Teoria” being Odalys' nickname for the narrator, meaning “Theorist”), and it goes further into the progression of the narrator's thinking over the years, pushback they have encountered from the PhD committee (obviously due to their inability to recognise groundbreaking genius), and more information about that visit from the brother (which provides nice background about the siblings' homelife and how that might have led to here). Throughout, the narrator is constantly quoting and referencing sources that I'm unfamiliar with: at one point they recall how they used to walk along with Selah and think-out-loud about what they were reading, and when they'd get back home and ask Selah for the details so they could capture them on paper, Selah would reply, “You were talking about some guy.” And that's what a *lot* of this felt like; the narrator quoting some guy instead of truly self-reflecting – and I'm sure that's the point. There's the nice irony of the narrator relying on the scholarship of (mostly) dead white men to upend gender and racial norms in their work and the slow revelation of a lonely life lived in self-imposed exile in an ivory tower; the piles of books and papers serving as refuge and defense against the unknowable world. It can be a slog to read through the scholarly passages – attributed to other philosophers and the narrator – but that's the life and the point, I suppose; it's a relief to me that the narrator's PhD advisor couldn't untangle their theories either (even if there is truth here):

Our gaze should light now on the male body, its location and its excesses. Theory has failed so far to witness the spectacle of the masculine. Theory has merely assumed the spectacle of the masculine as a priori. Theory has fallen down in rooting out this ubiquitous being that commands everything but appears nowhere, is fed and nurtured on a corpse, and requires more and more feeding. So the female body is placed on the pyre every day, roasted and dressed to enliven this necrophiliac. Who is at the center of this body, how is it constituted, how is it hidden from observation; who enforces this regimen of necrogenesis? This is my line of inquiry. Simply, who is the being that feeds off the corpse of femininity?

Theory is probably a work of genius, but one that I found slippery to get into. While I really liked the disconnects between things that the narrator writes and the things that the reader can see are otherwise in the relationships with the three women, the idiosyncratic writing style (while admittedly revelatory of the character) kept me at an emotional distance. Even so, I found sadness here; how sad is it that someone who thinks so much can know so little? I may not have exactly loved this read, but I can't give it fewer than four stars.

Wendy says

Beautifully written. Engaged me from beginning to end. I could relate to the journey that “Theory” (the dissertation) takes us on. Never leaving our mind for a minute. Every thing one reads or sees is related back to the focus of one’s work. It consumes us. Our relationship are effected and shaped by the work we are engaged in. Anyone that is writing their dissertation should read this book because it makes one understand we are more alike than we think we are.

Steve says

This novel features the most deliciously hateable narrator I've read in ages. Brand delights in capturing the fragile and haughty ego of academia, the self-absorption, and the complete lack of practical follow-through on theory as the genderless narrator fails time and again to translate their lofty ideas on gender and sex into their personal relationships.

Teoria chronicles her failed loves, always younger and removed from academia, with clinical analysis of their failings and a self-deprecating shrug at her own.

Brand throws in wonderfully obtuse academic jargon that makes just enough sense, but still skewers the all-encompassing and self-referential theorizing that plagues the social sciences.

I wouldn't say it's always an enjoyable read. It at times reminds me of the omnipresent cringe sitcoms like Arrested Development and Curb where you kind of sympathize with and hate the unlikeable characters.

But it is beautifully written and pitch perfect in tone, as you'd expect from Brand, who's known predominantly as a poet.

This novel is a perfect freeze framed middle finger portrait of everything wrong with academics.

Glennys Egan says

This book is captivating, gorgeously written, strange, heavy, hilarious. Having been involved in the academy (and involved with someone even more involved with it), it hit perhaps too close to home at times - and I enjoyed it for that, wincing with recognition and eagerly turning the page.

Ian Ridewood says

"I arrive at matters late. I'm an academic in life as well as in practice. I can only study a thing once it has passed."

Brand writes an imperfect yet still astounding treatise on quiet love and its distraction, while asking what makes up a life. Can we truly know who we are before our thesis is complete?

Brooke says

"I felt anxiety was a necessary part of being conscious in the world; it was a prerequisite of a moral and ethical life."

I feel the need to preface this review by stating that I did not go into this book with an unbiased mind. I have had the opportunity to learn from and work with Dionne Brand in the past. She is one of the most brilliant people I have ever met, and I could spend hours just listening to her thoughts and the way she articulates them.

I read *Theory* with Brand's voice in my mind. I can't say that I fully understand what happened in the book, but I can say that I enjoyed it. There were shining moments of brilliance that stopped me in my tracks and caused me to re-read the words until they imprinted themselves in my mind (for example, the sentence "*It is, in fact, the male body that is biology.*" continues to float through my mind a day after reading it). *Theory* weaves together the all-consuming world of academia with the all-consuming world of love and attraction, and through the dissertation that our narrator is working on, Brand touches on a variety of issues in contemporary society (including issues of race, class, gender, privilege, erasure etc.).

One of my favourite quotes, which is powerful as hell, is as follows: *"Their lives had been lived in privilege and elitism. They had fooled themselves into thinking that merely because they had privilege, they had earned it. They'd never taken into account the violence their existence had perpetrated on the world, on the very people who lived around them. They'd oiled their way into schools and clubs and journals and conferences. They actually believed that this made them worthy – they confused their privilege with intellect. These professors weren't conservatives, by any means. Oh no, they would never consider themselves in that category. They were left-wing scholars, social theorists. But I knew, and they knew, that academia was a place for perpetuating class and class privilege. It was a place for training up the ruling classes so they could continue ruling."*

Brilliant author. Brilliant book.

Thank you to NetGalley and Penguin Random House Canada for providing me with an advanced readers copy of *Theory* in exchange for an honest review. All of the quotes I have provided in this review are from the published version of the book, not the ARC.

Arianna Mao says

"I am missing something by being with you, though now I can't live well if you are not on my life."

So, this book is so incredibly difficult to review, and difficult to rate. The prose and writing is languid and beautiful (mostly), the thesis sparks insight, albeit, slowly, and in a sublime, subtle way, integrates very well with the plot. On the other hand... It's also a book that goes nowhere (or... Knowhere?) in the way that only academia can. Maybe it's me (it's definitely me), but it is lacking the synthesis of any particular subject, the ending is anticlimactic and celibate.

I'm talking in circles.

First of all, the conceit of a genderless first person pronoun is great, but I was forewarned and so it came off less strange and less intense of an experience as it could have been. Also, context clues ("My brother, Wendell, bore the brunt as he was a boy") provides insight to the narrator's gender identity, if only by describing everything they are not. Which I think is an incredibly clever way to demonstrate femininity as the other, a void that is not spoken of but only referred to by contrast; flipping the normalized expectation of gender on its head.

Secondly, the novel reads like a series of journal entries documenting the lifespan of a thesis, the formation of a theory. Theory is both the main character and their life work. They are trying to create themselves through their own work and their exploration. They go through the stages (embodied by the various lovers) from the superficial to the spiritual to discover what is the central thesis of the theory and of Theory. And of the struggles for a theory to prove itself both in the ivory tower of academia and for its inevitable struggle in the real world (the difficulties of application of abstraction).

Lastly though, for such a short book, the pacing is slow and pedantic. There are multiple beautiful quotes, interspersed with a lot of pontificating. I think this is intentional, and it is used to good effect, but man is it ever soporific.

Some more fantastic quotes:

"Why can't I simply speak without having that speech legitimated by God knows who?"

"Pecuniary ambitions speak of a picayune mind."

"We can only see differently if we frame it differently."
