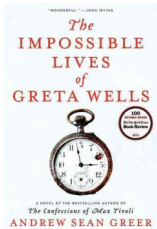


The Impossible Lives of Greta Wells

Many Eras, Many Lives



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Have you ever wondered how different you would have been if you'd lived during Napoleonic times, the First World War, or the Second? This novel explores how much the era a person lives in affects his or her personality, and choices in life.

In the autumn of 1985, Greta Wells loses her twin brother to AIDS. She's also been injured in a serious car accident that has also harmed her dear Aunt Ruth. Because Greta sloughs through a deep depression that will not lift, her psychiatrist recommends an old treatment that is becoming new again. Greta calls it electric shock therapy. Dr. Cerletti corrects her? It's called electric convulsive therapy.?

During my college years, I worked as a psychiatric aide at two mental hospitals, and I watched this procedure several times. It struck me as something medieval and horrifying, but luckily in *The Impossible Lives of Greta Wells*, ECT is not described in great physical detail.

Greer uses it mainly as a plot device--the treatment succeeds in transporting Greta to other times: to November 1918, just before the First World War ends and to December 1941, shortly before the Second World War begins. And amazingly, loved ones from her current modern life appear back in time as well. Her brother Felix is no longer dead but a married man in the 1940s, and a young man being harassed for his German nationality in 1918. His 80s lover, Adam turns up as a friendly lawyer to her brother in the 40s and the unspoken subtext implies that he is much more.

Back in the 80s, Nathan, Greta's boyfriend, has spurned her for another lover. But she's married to him and they are both parents to a son in the 40s. And in 1918, she has fallen in love with Leo while Nathan fights overseas.

Greer manages the juxtapositions smoothly. Each time, Greta receives a treatment she moves either back or forth to another time period except for once in 1918 when the Greta then has left New York for a tryst with Leo in Massachusetts. Because the machine is not available there, for several chapters Greta just goes back and forth between 1941 and 1985.

Except for this brief period, the novel is set near or on Patchin Place in Manhattan. Greer has researched New York history well, so the book's details seem authentic. Even though, she is only visiting for a time, all the Gretas from different times must make difficult life choices--to leave a husband or stay, to break off relationships, to deal with the sorrow of a husband having lover, or more tragically, to lose someone close to the great flu epidemic.

At times, the modern Greta's sensibility makes her act outrageously for the times--she's always hinting to Felix that he is gay, and maybe shouldn't get married. But the book's time travel is evocative and keeps the story interesting. The book offers a thousand what ifs, each offering another path for exploration.

Another excellent novel that examines reincarnation in fiction is David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*.

Posted by Dory L. on September 11, 2013

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