

The Weather Woman

Sally Gardner

Head of Zeus (Sep 19, 2023)

Hardcover \$29.99 (496pp)

978-1-78669-525-3

In Sally Gardner's fantastical novel *The Weather Woman*, gender, societal recognition, and family inheritance lead to precarious circumstances in Victorian London.

Neva, whose parents neglect her, can read the weather with perfect accuracy. When she survives an accident on the Thames that orphans her, she's taken in by Victor and Elise, who offer her a home and an education.

Victor understands that Neva's gift is extraordinary. He creates an automaton called the Weather Woman to showcase her talents. And despite the social pressure she faces to marry and bear children, he encourages Neva to adopt the persona of Eugene Jonas, a sophisticated dandy with a fancy for men, so she has more mobility in their gentlemen's society. But as time passes and Neva's feelings for a Frenchman grow, Neva starts to question whether Eugene has taken over her entire personality—and whether she will ever find a place in London society.

Neva's straightforwardness makes her different from other middle-class women. Her relationships are fraught because of her gender masquerade and her weather predictions. She's also haunted by her past. The book is lively with her gripping internal thoughts, featuring color, past trauma, and self-harm.

As Neva makes enemies of men who seek to undermine her weather-reading ability—including Lord Wardell, who loses money due to her predictions—she finds herself tangled in unconventional and intriguing webs. Themes of marriage, sexuality, and gender loom against the historical background, in which maintaining one's individuality is near impossible. Neva is even threatened with commitment to an asylum. Still, she grows into herself to secure her place, and her struggles become emblematic of the push for freedom.

In the oppressive Victorian London atmosphere of the historical novel *The Weather Woman*, the outcast members of society carve out a niche for themselves against stifling social expectations.

ALEENA ORTIZ (September / October 2023)

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