

1) Fate and fortune ... Lauren Groff. Photograph by Ulf Andersen/Getty images
24 December 2015

To qualify as the US book of the year – that ineffable title to which Lauren Groff’s third novel, *Fates and Furies*, lays persuasive claim – a novel needs more than just blockbuster sales. In fact, the book that “everybody” seems to be reading often climbs no higher than a respectable but unspectacular slot on the bestseller list. Still, people talk about it. Celebrities such as [Sarah Jessica Parker](#), [Carrie Brownstein](#) and [Miranda July](#) are pictured on Instagram with it. Critics love it, or – even better – debate its merits. Not only has Groff’s novel, by the Wall Street Journal’s count, landed on more US year-end best-of lists than any other work of fiction, but Amazon has made it official, stamping its endorsement on *Fates and Furies* as the retailer’s book of the year. The cherry on the top came from [Barack Obama](#), who earlier this month told People magazine he liked *Fates and Furies* more than anything else he’d read in 2015.

True, far more people bought the UK equivalent, Paula Hawkins’s *The Girl on the Train*, than *Fates and Furies* in 2015, but they talked about it less enthusiastically. *The Girl on the Train*, like a reduced-calorie substitute, numbed the hunger the reading public feels for more thrillers along the lines of Gillian Flynn’s brilliant, genre-busting *Gone Girl*, yet it doesn’t truly satisfy the craving. *Fates and Furies*, while decidedly a work of literary fiction, doesn’t just resemble *Gone Girl* in a few key respects; it comes much closer than *The Girl on the Train* to offering the same leery take on the state of modern matrimony.

Like *Gone Girl*, *Fates and Furies* is about a marriage in which each partner has a radically disparate view, not just of their union, but of the type of narrative constituted by their lives. It’s as if husband and wife each inhabit a different novel, in a different genre – one sunnily domestic, the other gothic. And in fact, they almost did: Groff has said that she originally wanted to publish *Fates and Furies* as two separate books.

The novel tells the story of Lotto and Mathilde Satterwhite. He is the darling of a prosperous Florida family – “Lotto was special. Golden”. She, an apparent “ice princess”, is the survivor of a past about which her husband has only the fuzziest idea beyond it being “sad and dark”, and above all “blank behind her”. The first half of the book offers Lotto’s view of their life together as he rises from charming but failed actor to celebrated playwright, thanks in no small part to Mathilde’s editorial finesse. The second half reveals that Mathilde has, through implacable willpower, transcended circumstances that read like a hotchpotch of Greek tragedy, fable and detective novel. Much of what Lotto takes for granted in his good fortune, it turns out, is due to Mathilde’s ruthless machination, right down to their marriage itself. She genuinely loves him, but she initially set out to win him for mercenary reasons.

On the surface, this premise echoes the familiar observation that even two people who live together intimately can end up feeling they hardly know each other. Given that most fiction is read by women, and that the purchase of a hardcover novel suggests a certain midlife affluence, it’s hardly surprising that so many book buyers would find this theme arresting and easy to relate to. They are at that point in life when they realise that a wedding is less the end of a fairytale than the beginning of a mystery, and sometimes an ugly one. This, in itself, isn’t new; a popular premise in suspense fiction has a new widow making the nasty discovery that her late husband led a secret life.

But *Fates and Furies*, like *Gone Girl*, wrenches the old wronged-woman formula out of joint. These are both tales of female puppet masters, geniuses who invisibly engineer their marriages to appear

to best advantage to outsiders – and, in the case of Groff’s novel, to the husband himself. Amy Dunne does it to take revenge, to bring the hapless Nick to heel and to consolidate her power over him. Mathilde does it to preserve the security she has sought all her life and to protect Lotto from ever knowing “the scope of her darkness”. Each woman is far cleverer than her spouse.

Amy’s scheme is outlandishly criminal, while Mathilde’s is mostly just patronising. The good husbands in Victorian novels sheltered their wives from the world’s harshness, but now the roles are reversed. As exaggerated as they are, Amy and Mathilde resemble every working mum who wonders if her husband has any notion of how much effort she puts into the administration of their family life. That includes not just the serious stuff such as the kids’ healthcare and schools, but social labour on everything from birthday celebrations and the coordination of dinner parties to holiday plans. She schedules and organises; he blithely assumes it all just happens. She shakes her head and, in her rare free hours, she curls up with a copy of *Fates and Furies*.

All of which makes President Obama’s admiration for the novel intriguing. If he were eligible to run for another term, the choice might be written off as a bid to ingratiate himself with female voters of the bookish persuasion. But I think not. The leader of the free world is, after all, famously uxorious, and the brilliance, organisational and otherwise, of [Michelle Obama](#) is a secret to no one, not even her husband. Her favourite book of 2015, by the way, was Elizabeth Alexander’s [The Light of the World](#), the memoir of a poet whose husband died suddenly aged 50. If they were characters in a novel by Groff or Flynn, that would be a little worrying.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/dec/24/why-the-fates-and-furies-this-years-most-talked-about-novel>

2) [November 2, 2015 Issue](#) Scenes from a Marriage Lauren Groff’s “Fates and Furies.” By [James Wood](#)

Groff’s language is precise, lyrical, rich, at once worldly and epically transfiguring.

Formally, Lauren Groff’s new novel, “Fates and Furies” (Riverhead), resembles a bed that long marital use has unevenly depressed: it tells the story of an apparently successful marriage from two different perspectives, the husband’s and then the wife’s, and it explores the fierce asymmetry of the two tellings. Essentially, the man’s view of things (a section titled “Fates”) is happy, open, naïvely victorious, and complacent; the woman’s (“Furies”) is secretive, damaged, less happy, and, accordingly, much less complacent. The story’s form not only promises a stereoscopic account of the mythological monad that is marriage but holds the tempting possibility that the angrier second version might modify the easier first one, forcing it out of untruth with corrective revelation.

Lotto (short for Lancelot) and Mathilde meet at a party, near the end of their time as Vassar undergraduates. The attraction is intense, and they get quickly married, just before graduation. The relationship is puzzling to Lotto’s friends: he is a college god, blessed with charm, intelligence, and riches, strapping and handsome (six feet six), a rising young actor. Mathilde is mysterious. She seems to have no legible past, no obvious context. She had no friends at college, and is thought of as an “ice queen” or worse. She is glamorous, but people can’t decide whether she’s beautiful or “interesting-looking.” Temperamentally, the two seem opposed. Lotto thinks her “the purest person he’d ever met,” and later likens her to a saint. This is a characteristically patriarchal gesture: Mathilde seems to ask for little, and subsumes whatever desire for a career she may have had to his larger claims. But Lotto’s praise of her purity also has to do with the holy hygiene, the devoted

erasure of Mathilde's self-presentation. One morning, we are told, "it struck him hard that she had no family at all":

The little she spoke of childhood was shadowed with abuse. He'd imagined it vividly: poverty, beat-up trailer, spiteful—she implied worse—uncle. Her most vivid memories of her childhood were of the television that was never turned off. Salvation of school, scholarship, modeling for spare change. They had begun to accrete stories between them. . . . How she'd been discovered for modeling by a gargoyle of a man on a train. It must have taken an immense force of will for Mathilde to turn her past, so sad and dark, blank behind her. Now she had only him.

This is as far as Lotto's curiosity ever takes him, and it is all we hear, in the novel's first section, about Mathilde's origins. To Lotto (and to the reader, who sees Mathilde through Lotto's eyes in this part), she is a successful American tabula rasa: her real life began, conveniently enough for him, when she met her husband.

The couple move to New York (it is the early nineteen-nineties). They are poor (he has been cut off from the family wealth, a penalty for his spousal choice) but happy, heroically bohemian, erotically enchanted with each other. During his twenties, Lotto struggles to make it as an actor, while Mathilde works at an art gallery, earning the regular money. Though naturally ebullient, Lotto, whose father used to say that he would become President or an astronaut, suffers from depression, and starts drinking. A reversal of fortune occurs on New Year's Eve, 1999, when, in a kind of drunken trance, Lotto stays up all night and in five hours writes a play, "The Springs," about his tempestuous family background. Mathilde wakes him to tell him that she has read it, that he has found his true talent, and that she has already started editing the manuscript. Lotto, lucky man, appears to remember nothing of his dusky labor. "The Springs" launches the literary career of Lancelot Satterwhite, who goes on to write a series of celebrated plays, emerging as one of the most distinguished dramatists of his day. Mathilde quits the art gallery, and they move to the country, where she keeps house and manages Lotto's business interests. Thanks to his wife, Lotto never again scrubs a toilet or pays a bill, and smugly boasts—in public, on a literary panel—that his wife "gave up her job years ago to make mine run more smoothly. She loves to cook and clean and edit my work, it makes her happy to do these things."

Groff is an original writer, whose books are daringly nonconformist; she has a sharp gift for mimesis, yet she also tends naturally toward imagining semi-autonomous worlds. Admirably, she writes inside and outside history at once, refusing to play safe by merely contouring the known. "Arcadia," her previous novel, convincingly tells the life story of a boy who grows up in the early nineteen-seventies, in a commune in upstate New York. It follows his development all the way to 2018, as he leaves the community of his childhood and joins the larger world. The enclosed, utopian space of Arcadia, with its cultic leaders and its ragged freedoms, is brilliantly brought to life, the details absorbed by the restless, compound eye of an impressionable child. Likewise, "Fates and Furies" refuses to be a conventional domestic novel. Playing with the Greek commands of her title, Groff enlarges (and also reduces) her protagonists. They are sentenced by fate and charged with fury; they are heroic and doomed, modern and ancient, comic and tragic, dramatic and diminished. This tone, essentially mock-heroic, is extremely difficult to maintain, and it can't be said that "Fates and Furies" finally succeeds in that maintenance. But the first part of the novel, at least, which glorifies and lays bare its golden hero, Lancelot Satterwhite, is consistently surprising and vital. The ornamented names tell us something at once: Lancelot may have been born in Florida, may be the

wealthy heir of a water-bottling company named Hamlin Springs, but, with that name and a father called Gawain, he isn't going to resemble many contemporary Floridians. Lotto's life will be closer to some epic chanson than to the gray grammar of novelistic realism. His father dies when Lotto is young; it is his atrocious mother, Antoinette—never more than an operatic villain—who cuts off his inheritance when she discovers that he has married the inappropriate and enigmatic Mathilde. But Lotto triumphs anyway.

Groff sows her text with bracketed authorial interventions, in which she plays the role of omniscient Greek chorus, reminding us that she is measuring the thread for her invented spools. Lotto's progress is regularly interrupted in this way. When he begins what will be a vigorous erotic career, our chorus murmurs, within square brackets, “[Lust! Old story renewed in young flesh.]” When he considers suicide but resists the notion, the author approves: “[True. It was not his time.]” Elsewhere, a minor character is awarded a Nabokovian flash-forward: “[Her death would be soon and sudden. Ski tumble; embolism.]”

Richer and more interesting is Groff's unbracketed language, which is thrillingly good—precise, lyrical, rich, both worldly and epically transfiguring. Young Lotto, seen cycling from a distance, is a “mantis on his bicycle”; a dog's erection is “a tube of lipstick all the way extended.” The sound of a swimming pool—“the pool suckled at its gutters.” A lake is “poxed by the touch of scattered rain.” A bus, lowering itself to let people down, “knelt the passengers off like a carnival elephant.” Bubbles “flea-jump” out of the top of a champagne glass. There are many more examples, on page after page. The prose is not only beautiful and vigorously alert; it insists on its own heroic registration, and lifts this story of a modern marriage out of the mundane. Even Lotto and Mathilde's sex is grand and yet wittily figured: “his wife posting atop him like a prize equestrienne.” Groff mobilizes these stylistic talents to convey that tricky double sense of characters who (for all we know) may or may not be heroic but are certainly heroic in their own estimation.

So it is an enormous shame that the novel's second half squanders in quick moments what was slowly accumulated in the first half's careful pages. Reviewers get coy around narrative secrets: spoilers make them tongue-tied. You might imagine, from this novel's shy reviews, that the second half of “Fates and Furies” functions as a kind of necessary reality check, in which the wife supplants the epic male vision with a more accurate and un-illusioned perspective. That is wanly true. Mathilde reflects on her invisibility as the wife of a famous writer, on Lotto's egotistical complacency, on how she quietly rewrote half of his plays (“she would silently steal in at night and refine what he had written”). But these references seem halfhearted and novelistically gestural—we have to take on faith the assertion that Mathilde, like one of the mice in Beatrix Potter's “The Tailor of Gloucester,” mended her husband's work at nighttime, because the claim is never more plausibly or solidly rendered. The energy of the novel's second half is not, in fact, torqued toward a furious corrective analysis of the married state. (Or even toward an unfurious one, which would doubtless be as interesting.) Disappointingly, this part of the book becomes a lurid fairy tale whose heroine is not so much furious as a Fury, not so much disillusioned as a Devil.

Beware: I'm unafraid to host a big spoiler party—a novel that can be truly “spoiled” by the summary of its plot is a novel that was already spoiled by that plot. At the end of the first section, Lotto dies. He is forty-six, the age of his father's death. In Part 2, we turn to the story of glamorous and inaccessible Mathilde—who, we learn, was born in France, as Aurélie, her mother a fishwife in Nantes, her father a stonemason. When she is four, she effectively kills her brother (by smilingly encouraging him to fall down the stairs), and is banished by her parents: sent first to a chilly

grandmother in Paris (where she sleeps in a closet for six years) and then, at the age of eleven, to a nasty uncle in Pennsylvania. This uncle informs her that he won't often be at home, and that his driver will look after her needs. Alone, Aurélie learns English by watching TV and changes her name to Mathilde: "Like that, all at once, Mathilde grew up over Aurélie's skin." All the rooms in the house are locked, save for her bedroom. But one day the uncle accidentally leaves open a small room under the stairs, where Mathilde discovers a beautiful painting that turns out to be a stolen van Eyck. Later, Mathilde will—in short order—pay for her education at Vassar by prostituting herself to a wealthy art dealer; pay for the first performance of "The Springs" by blackmailing her uncle; get pregnant by Lotto and arrange an abortion (because she is convinced that her children will have fangs and claws). And there's more: after her husband's death, Mathilde will sleep with a handsome actor named Land, who will turn out to be Lotto's son, conceived by his first girlfriend, in Florida, when she was seventeen and Lotto was only fifteen.

The point of this cruel outing is not merely to illuminate the heaped incredibilities (which awkwardly subsist within a broadly realist register); or only to suggest that Groff is flailing here, reaching for whatever motifs she can stuff into the vessel—Greek tragedy, "Bluebeard's Castle" (locked rooms), "The Secret Garden" (horrid banished daughters), "Rumpelstiltskin" (erotic contracts). I find these melodramatic accelerations—"Like that, all at once, Mathilde grew up over Aurélie's skin"—humanly untruthful (is that how it happens, like that, all at once?) and thus a kind of vandalism of the novel form. But tastes in unreality differ. The acute problem is not so much improbability as eccentricity. Mathilde never told Lotto about any of it (she "made a promise that he would never know the scope of her darkness")—not the dead brother, or the French childhood, or the rewriting of his plays, or the abortion. The extremity of Mathilde's suffering makes her repression of it less interesting than a more ordinary version of such self-control (she doesn't really have a self, so its repression just makes her a double negative); and Lotto's shortsighted complacency is also suddenly less interesting, because less culpable (we can't usefully judge him for not knowing what was strenuously kept from him).

Thus the novel hobbles its power to speak of marriage in general. Indeed, far from telling us something suggestive about the desires, different and shared, of two genders, the rapidities and savageries of the second half run the risk of drowning gender in the purest essence of fable: the man belongs to the Fates, the woman (or "devil girl," as she is called) to the Furies; if it was the man's fate to have married a Fury—so this narrative logic seems to go—it is the woman's fate to *be* a Fury.

The "revelation" of the novel's second half, far from binding the form in meaning, is the thread that fatally unravels it. Narrative secrets are not the same as human mysteries, a lesson that novelists seem fated to forget, again and again; the former quickly confess themselves, and fall silent, while the true mysteries go on speaking. ♦

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/11/02/scenes-from-a-marriage-books-james-wood>

3) Fates and Furies by Lauren Groff review - a marriage seen from two sides .[Susanna Rustin](#)
Like *Gone Girl*, this tightly controlled portrait of a cruel and impossible relationship pivots on a shift in perspective. Wednesday 28 October 2015



Where it begins ... New England. Photograph: Michael Melford/Block Island Tourism Council

It starts with honeymoon sex on a cold New England beach, and ends with lonely old age in London decades later. Lauren Groff's fat novel *Fates and Furies* is the portrait of a marriage, seen from both sides: first his, then hers. Groff lives in Florida and the early section describing Lotto's youth in her home state has a magic-realist flavour. This golden boy, or "shining one", born in a hurricane, is adored by his parents and aunt until death intrudes, his mother metamorphoses from mermaid to beached whale, and he starts to drink and take drugs with the wrong crowd.

An accident on the beach, a first experience of sex that makes him think of "mangoes, split papayas, fruits tart and sweet and dripping with juice", and Lotto's wayward, tropical youth is brought to an abrupt halt by his banishment to a boarding school in New England. A chilly, lonely spell is broken by more sex and admission to Vassar liberal arts college, where Lotto discovers acting and his future wife, Mathilde, at a party: "He felt the drama of the scene. Also, how many people were watching them, how beautiful he and Mathilde looked together. In a moment, he'd been made new. His past was gone. He fell to his knees and took Mathilde's hands to press them on his heart. He shouted up at her, 'Marry me!'" Of course this is meant to be stagey. Lotto is an actor (he will soon fail, and discover his gift for writing). But their first meeting sets the tone of a relationship that never feels fully inhabited by Groff, or accessible to her reader. The novel makes much of the dream couple's good looks, energetic sex life and fidelity; none of this compensates for their lack of emotional intimacy.

It all makes more sense in the novel's second half, when we discover just how much Mathilde has been hiding. But whereas Lotto's childhood was full of the vivid sense-impressions typical of early memories, Mathilde's biography feels cheap as well as cruel. Groff layers on the trauma so thick as to be implausible: formative events include the violent death of a sibling and abandonment by her parents, followed by years in the care of a French grandmother who is a prostitute and an uncle who is a crime boss with a Van Eyck masterpiece in a cupboard. From there, it's only a short hop to New York, where she is robbed of her virginity by a sadistic aesthete – another cliché. The scene of her initiation is simply revolting: "Nobody likes what I'm about to do to you at first," he said. "You need to fantasize to make it work. Stay with it." Groff, inexplicably, makes Mathilde have an orgasm. In the midst of all this is Lotto's supposedly brilliant career as a playwright, with long excerpts from several deeply dull plays inserted in the novel.

Fates and Furies, like Gillian Flynn's bestseller [Gone Girl](#), pivots on the shift in point of view. Everything we thought we knew in the first half comes undone in the second. There is a riddle

around Mathilde's fertility and a bigger one about her deepest nature: is she good or evil? The narrator either doesn't know or has decided not to tell us, since key facts are left hazy.

But the level of dishonesty in an ostensibly solid marriage is, to me, impossible to believe in. The trail of corpses, including that of a tormented genius composer, is lurid. The private detective who pops up in the book's latter stages seems to have walked in from a cartoon. The style, combining hard-boiled four-word sentences with abstract musings, jarred.

Groff is a manipulator of information, who controls what the reader understands in a novel that is all about narration. She won high praise for a volume of short stories and two [previous novels](#). Here, she has Mathilde express what is surely her own hankering for a "messier, sharper" fiction. Perhaps others will find more to admire than I did in this strange mashup of literary and pulp fiction.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/28/fates-and-furies-lauren-groff-review>