

The Luminaries

Author Background

Eleanor Catton

- Born 1985 in Canada
- Raised in Canada and (from the age of 6) New Zealand
- Lives in Auckland, New Zealand

Eleanor Catton was born in Canada in 1985 to New Zealander parents. Catton's mother was a Library Administrator and her father was a Philosophy Professor.

In 2007 Catton completed a Master of Arts in Creative Writing at the Victoria University of Wellington, winning the University's Adam Prize in Creative Writing for her manuscript, *The Rehearsal*. A postmodern tale of a theatre company's dramatization of a high school sex scandal, *The Rehearsal* has since been published internationally. Catton won several prizes for *The Rehearsal* including the NZSA Hubert Church Best First Book Award for Fiction. *The Rehearsal* was shortlisted for the Guardian First Book Award, the Prix Femina literature award, the abroad category of the Prix Médicis, the University of Wales Dylan Thomas Prize 2010 and Stonewall's Writer of the Year Award 2011.

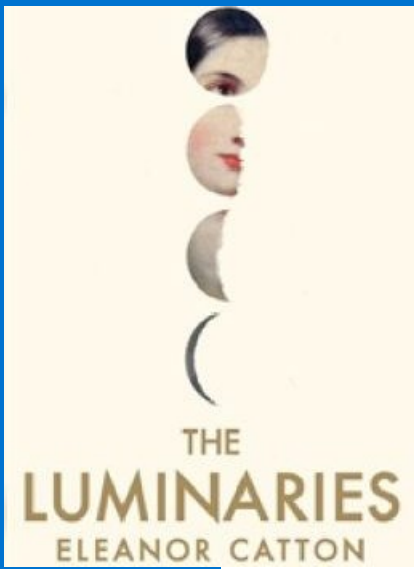
In 2008 Catton was the recipient of the Glenn Schaeffer Fellowship through which she attended the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop and commenced work on *The Luminaries*. Catton's second novel, *The Luminaries* was the winner of the 2013 Man Booker Prize and the 2013 Governor General's Literary Award. At 28, Catton was the youngest person (and the second New Zealander) to win the prestigious Man Booker Prize. In February 2015 Catton was made an honorary literary fellow in the New Zealand Society of Authors' annual Waitangi Day Honours.

Catton's literary influences include Frances Hodgson Burnett, Willard Price, Michael Morpurgo, Roald Dahl and J.K. Rowling. Catton argues that:

"writers of literary fiction would do well to read more books for children.... The project of the writer for children is so honest, because they can't be self-indulgent. Children can see self-indulgence a mile away."

In 2013, Catton told *The New York Times* that she has "*anxiety dreams featuring belligerent readers at literary festivals*"! After publication of her first novel, *The Rehearsal*, Catton would dream of an imaginary reader accusing: "*You do realize that you didn't write this book, don't you?*" After the publicity surrounding *The Luminaries*' success, Catton's anxiety dreams featured a new reader standing up and asking: "*You do realize that your book doesn't make sense, don't you?*" Catton concluded that the new dream was a sign of some healthy progress in her anxiety "*from the self to the work*".

Sources: Publisher's Website (Granta); The New York Times; The Financial Times; The Man Booker Prize website; The New Zealand Book Council website.



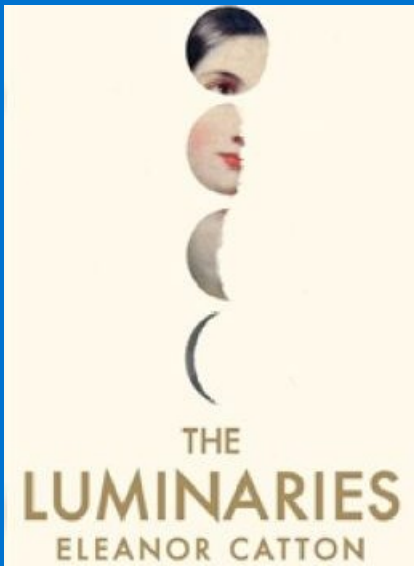
The Luminaries

Book Summary

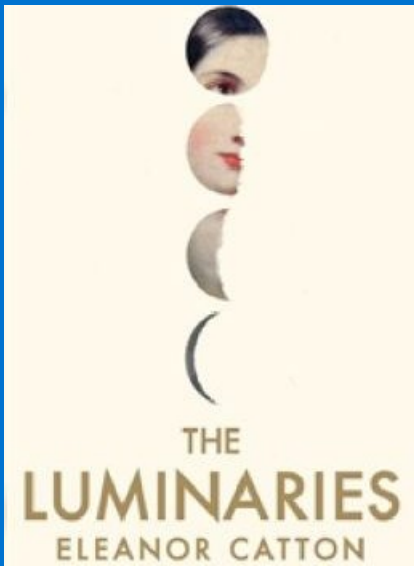
It is 1866, and Walter Moody has come to make his fortune upon the New Zealand goldfields. On arrival, he stumbles across a tense gathering of twelve local men, who have met in secret to discuss a series of unsolved crimes. A wealthy man has vanished, a whore has tried to end her life, and an enormous fortune has been discovered in the home of a luckless drunk. Moody is soon drawn into the mystery: a network of fates and fortunes that is as complex and exquisitely patterned as the night sky.

The Luminaries is an extraordinary piece of fiction. It is full of narrative, linguistic and psychological pleasures, and has a fiendishly clever and original structuring device. Written in pitch-perfect historical register, richly evoking a mid-19th century world of shipping and banking and goldrush boom and bust, it is also a ghost story, and a gripping mystery. It is a thrilling achievement and will confirm for critics and readers that Catton is one of the brightest stars in the international writing firmament.

Source: Publisher (Granta)



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Discussion Questions

1. At the start of the book Walter Moody stumbles across a tense meeting between twelve local men and is entrusted with their secrets. What do you make of these men? Do they tell Walter the whole truth, or are their stories distorted by external loyalties, self-interest and their individual character traits?
2. Catton has given each of the twelve men the personality stereotypical to an astrological sign. Does this mean all their actions are pre-determined? And when taking into account the fact that this is a story filled with coincidences, unpredictability and mistaken assumptions, what do you think Catton is saying about fate vs. coincidence?
3. Throughout the book, people are either hurting Anna or helping her. What is it about her that makes her a litmus test for other characters' morality?
4. Following the court scene, do you feel that each character has received what they deserve? Were any characters let off lightly or unjustly punished?
5. Was the novel's ending a shock or inevitable? What does the outcome say about free will and determinism?
6. Following the zodiac as a guiding structure, *The Luminaries* is a stunning feat of construction. Some have argued that high structural complexity can come at the expense of plot. In what ways does *The Luminaries* defy (or support) this theory?
7. *The Luminaries* is set in a New Zealand that is rapidly changing as a result of the gold rush. Banking has become all-important and the outside world is exerting its growing influence - resulting in the confluence of "the savage and civil, the old world and the new". Do any of the concerns of the people in this place and time still resonate today? Are there ways in which this story may be universal?
8. *Just for fun*: Astrology is a prominent theme in the book. Do you believe in astrology? Do you attribute any part of your personality to your star sign? Do you identify with the personality of any of the twelve men (stereotypical of the twelve zodiac signs) in *The Luminaries*?

Adapted from LitLovers website; Man Booker Prize website and the Publisher.

The Luminaries

Reviews

It's a lot of fun, like doing a Charlotte Brontë-themed crossword puzzle while playing chess and Dance Dance Revolution on a Bongo Board. Some readers will delight in the challenge, others may despair. I went both ways: always lost in admiration for this young New Zealander's vast knowledge and narrative skill, sometimes lost in her game, wishing at times for more warmth, delighted by her old-school chapter headings ("In which a stranger arrives . . ." "In which Quee Long brings a complaint before the law . . ."), puzzled by her astrology, Googling everything twice and three times, scratching my head, laughing out loud, sighing with pleasure at sudden connections, flipping back pages and chapters and whole sections for rereadings, forging ahead with excitement renewed.

...

"The Luminaries" is a true achievement. Catton has built a lively parody of a 19th-century novel, and in so doing created a novel for the 21st, something utterly new. The pages fly, the great weight of the book shifting quickly from right hand to left, a world opening and closing in front of us, the human soul revealed in all its conflicted desperation. I mean glory. And as for the length, surely a book this good could never be too long.

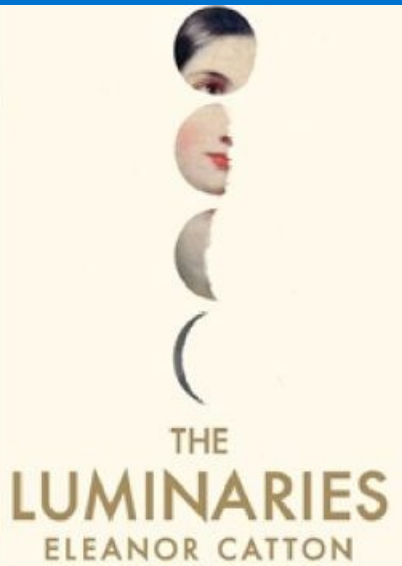
New York Times

The Luminaries has been perfectly constructed as the consummate literary page-turner. But it is also a massive shaggy dog story; a great empty bag; an enormous, wicked, gleeful cheat. For nothing in this enormous book, with its exotic and varied cast of characters whose lives all affect each other and whose fates are intricately entwined, amounts to anything like the moral and emotional weight one would expect of it. That's the point, in the end, I think, of *The Luminaries*. It's not about story at all. It's about what happens to us when we read novels – what we think we want from them – and from novels of this size, in particular. Is it worthwhile to spend so much time with a story that in the end isn't invested in its characters? Or is thinking about why we should care about them in the first place the really interesting thing? Making us consider so carefully whether we want a story with emotion and heart or an intellectual idea about the novel in the disguise of historical fiction ... There lies the real triumph of Catton's remarkable book.

...

Catton has created her own world in *The Luminaries* – an upside-down, southern hemisphere kind of a place with its own astrological calendar that casts its own kind of influence, its own light. The clue is in the title, after all, and in the confusing frontispiece ... : that this great, intricately crafted doorstopper of a historical novel, with its portentous introduction, astrological tables, character charts and all the rest, in fact weighs nothing at all. Decide for yourself, Reader, at the end of all your reading, what you think of that: is "nothing" enough?

The Guardian (Australia)



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Reviews (continued)

[Catton's] novel is not only set in the nineteenth century; it appears to be *of* the nineteenth century, or as close to it as possible. It has the scope and length of a nineteenth century novel, and its central mysteries are established and explored in a nineteenth century style. Its omniscient narrator glides between the novel's many characters, occasionally pausing to comment directly on the action as it unfolds at a leisurely nineteenth century pace, alerting the reader to a previously overlooked detail, or apologising for an abridgement or digression. Minor details add to the novel's period flourishes: each chapter begins with a brief italicised summary of its content; expletives are coyly concealed with dashes ('Well I'll be d—ned, Charlie, I'll be God d—ned'); exclamation marks are tactically deployed to emphasis moments of drama or surprise. Some reviewers have compared Catton's narrative voice in *The Luminaries* to that of George Eliot or Charles Dickens. Others, perhaps most notably C.K. Stead, one of New Zealand's foremost novelists and critics, have dismissed her work as a pastiche, a 'precocious imitation' of Victorian literary realism.

Sydney Review of Books

Every episode has its setting, decor, clothing, its period bric-a-brac, its slightly formal but often sharp dialogue. This is costume drama. ... The history of literary fiction in the 20th century was a struggle, never entirely successful, to escape from this kind of writing. It is the mode of the novel in its Victorian heyday, with something also of the 20th-century murder mystery.... It is, you might say, Virginia Woolf's nightmare of how many steps back a woman might take the form if given her head and a room of her own. ... I finished the novel acknowledging enormous talent but feeling the demands made on time and attention offered insufficient human or intellectual return.

The Financial Times

Every now and then you get to read a novel that elevates you far beyond the bric-a-brac of everyday routine, takes you apart, reassembles you, and leaves you feeling as though you have been on holiday with a genius. Eleanor Catton's astonishing new novel, *The Luminaries*, does just that. ... Don't let the hefty size put you off (more than 800 pages) because you enter the world of a novelist who, in her late 20s, writes with such wisdom, compassion, elegance and craft you don't want to depart that world in a hurry. ...

I don't want to spoil the effect of the unfolding narrative's twists and turns by exposing them, but when I reached the end I felt extremely satisfied. Catton is a remarkable writer and this is a remarkable book that has earned its place in essential New Zealand reading.

New Zealand Herald

