

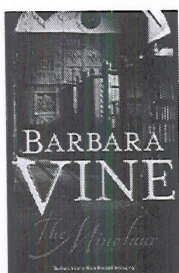
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The digested read

The Minotaur, by Barbara Vine

Viking, £17.99

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The resemblance to Mrs Cosway was startling, yet I knew it couldn't be her. I turned away. A voice called out. "Kerstin."

She pronounced it Curstin, rather than the correct usage Shashtin. "Ella?" I asked. Thirty years had passed since that momentous year but the memories were still fresh.

I had come to England in 1968 to reacquaint myself with my lover, Mark. How commonplace this sounds, but at the time it seemed so avant garde. We chose to live apart and I took a job living with the Cosways in a run-down manor house in Essex.

The Cosways reminded me of one of those sinister families I regularly encountered in Victorian fiction. You may think from my language that I am somewhat priggish, but that is far from the case. I just cannot stop myself from writing like Anita Brookner.

The mother, Julia, had an unpleasant tongue. "Look after that useless schizophrenic son of mine," she spat. "Largactil is all he needs."

Three of her daughters, Ida, Ella and Winifred, though middle-aged, were as yet unmarried, and were strangely in her thrall. The youngest daughter, Zorah, was more her own person but still completely out of place in the 1960s.

I have wondered since how much I could have done to avert the tragedy that was to befall - and wondered, also, whether writing those words could generate some much-needed tension in the story - but my duties were not onerous, and I spent much of my time perusing the neglected labyrinthine library that was strangely symbolic yet tangential to the story.

To my surprise, I found John quite normal. He did not seem schizophrenic, but merely mildly autistic.

"I shall be marrying Eric," Winifred declared. This seemed a good match: Eric was the rector, and spinsters are often attracted to the clergy in the

Victorian genre.

"None of this seems quite real to me," Mark said one weekend, as I told him of Julia's affair with the village doctor. So I left him and took up with the organist's son.

The arrival of the bohemian Felix changed everything, and Ella secretly told me she was in love. But it was when I chanced upon Winifred also making secret assignations with Felix that a chill ran through me.

Should I have done more to stop it? How can you prevent the predictability of the second-rate Victorian pastiche?

I later discovered the whole village knew all the family secrets, but by then it was too late. Winifred was dead. "It was that mad son of mine," yelled Julia.

I informed the police this could not be. Thereafter Ida and Julia accused one another, and the investigation only ended when Julia died in a manor house fire reminiscent of Jane Eyre.

My mind returned to the present. "So John is all right?" "Yes," said Ella, "and I married the rector."

The digested read ... digested

Kerstin picks up the threads to find a load of old bull

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