BOOK CLUB EXPRESS

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Ministry of Time

by Kaliane Bradley

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Discussion Questions

1. Toward the beginning of the book, the bridge declares, “Set your narrative as canon and in a tiny way you have pried your death out of time, as long as the narrative is recalled by someone else.” With this in mind, consider the power and also the danger of narrative. Do you believe narrative is used as a weapon at all in this story?

2. At the beginning of the book, Adela tells the bridge that the Ministry prefers to refer to the time-travelers as “expats” rather than “refugees.” This is set up in contrast with the experience of the bridge’s mother, who was automatically labeled a refugee after leaving Cambodia. What do you think the author is trying to communicate by using the vocabulary of immigration in the context of time-travel? How do the experiences of the expats and the bridge’s mother compare, and why might the Ministry be invested in categorizing them differently?

3. In Chapter 5, the bridge, in conversation with Quentin, refers to herself, rather than Graham and his fellow expats, as “the pioneer” and “the experiment.” What do you think she means by this, and how does it reflect the way her understanding of the Ministry and its work may be changing?

4. Consider the parallels between the Victorian-era norms Graham espouses and those of the bridge’s near-future era (almost identical to our own). Did any of the similarities or differences surprise you?

5. Gore is fascinated by Spotify and loves a hot bath, but rejects television and other modern conveniences. What surprised you most about his encounters with technology? Which elements of modern life would you expect to be most appealing and most off-putting to someone from the Victorian era?

6. Throughout the book, the bridge questions the morality of her intentions and motivations, particularly when it comes to Graham. Imagine you are friends with the bridge and she’s asked for your advice on how to most ethically handle her work with Graham and the Ministry. What would you say?

7. Interspersed between regular chapters are short passages set during the Franklin Expedition. How do these passages, the only part of the book not from the perspective of the bridge, alter the way you consider Graham’s character and experience?

8. While there are many sources of tension in this story, there also is a wealth of comic relief, from the bridge’s chicken bag to Margaret’s vocabulary (insults, in particular), to the various ways the expats respond to phenomena of the future (washing machines, Spotify, germs). How did the author’s sense of humor influence how you perceived the characters and their situation

9. Toward the end of the book, we discover that when Graham first met the bridge, he mistook her for the Inuit woman whose husband he had accidentally killed in the Arctic. What do you think the author is trying to do by making this connection between the two women?

10. Having finished the book, do you feel you can identify, with confidence, any characters as explicit heroes or villains?

11. After you finish the book, reconsider the first chapter of THE MINISTRY OF TIME. Do you understand the characters and plot differently the second time around?

12. How do you interpret the ending of the novel, and what does the future hold for the characters?

13. Throughout the novel, our character is known only as “the bridge.” Why do you think the author made that choice?

Author Interview

Kaliane Bradley is about to turn us all into Arctic explorer fangirls

In the debut author's dazzling The Ministry of Time, Victorian explorer Graham Gore is transported to modern-day London.

Interview by Laura Hubbard

In The Ministry of Time, an unnamed narrator serves as "bridge" (read: guide and guardian) to Victorian polar explorer Graham Gore, who's been transported from his doomed mission to present-day London. From there, what at first seems to be a fish-out-of-water comedy unfolds into a meditation on the lure of bureaucracy, an exploration of both the liberation and trauma of Graham and his fellow "expats," and an unexpected love story between Graham and the bridge.

If you were a bridge, what type of person would you want your charge to be?

Someone like Arthur Reginald-Smyth, the expat from the First World War—quiet, kind, sincerely interested in the world around him. The alternative would be to commit myself to the stress and anxiety of a really difficult, badly adjusted expat for the humor. Oh, you're trying to kill the television because you think it's full of demons? OK then. Make sure you put the ax back when you're done.

Why did you choose for your main character, the bridge, to remain nameless?

There's a hierarchy of names in the book. The bridge never names herself to herself, because she is herself, and doesn't need to: She sees herself as the still, universal point of the turning narrative. The expats, whom she monitors, studies and obsesses over, she names in full: Graham Gore, Margaret Kemble, Arthur Reginald-Smyth, etc. People like Simellia, Adela and Quentin are major enough "characters" in her narrative for her to name, but she doesn't name them "in full" as she does the expats, because she doesn't imagine them in the same level of detail (which—no spoilers—is a major mistake on her part). Then there are people referred to by their jobs, like the Secretary and the Brigadier, who are not even people to her, but functions of institutions—another telling example of how she views the world and authority.

Early on, the bridge thinks about paperwork and the safety it provides, whether that's for an immigrant or just for someone with a great deal of social anxiety. Do you see a connection between this sentiment and the way the bridge connects with the Ministry and bureaucracy?

Definitely. The bridge is fixated on the idea of control, and excessive documentation, choosing and fixing a narrative, is one way she maintains this. Though she would never admit this—would probably consider it a sign of character weakness—she has had to deal with the inherited trauma of a profound and terrifying lack of control, and it has made her obsessive about always having control, stability, protection. The specific way she has channeled this is into a fondness for bureaucracy, and a certain moral blind spot about the methods one might use to maintain control over a situation or a person.

Of all of the members of the Erebus and the Terror, why did you choose Graham Gore?

Our eyes met across a crowded Wikipedia page . . . I was watching "The Terror," a 2018 show about the Franklin expedition, and I was trying to keep track of who was who in each episode by checking the fan wiki. Graham Gore appears in the first two episodes and I was intrigued by his name, so I looked him up. That was really all it took. I loved the pen portrait drawn by his commander, James Fitzjames: "a man of great stability of character, a very good officer, and the sweetest of tempers." Who could resist?!

Every polar exploration aficionado has their favorites. Other than your charming re-creation of Graham Gore, who are yours?

My other polar exploration favorite is a wretched man named Robert McClure, who was eventually knighted and became a vice admiral. He is briefly mentioned in my book by Graham, who (historically) knew him and sailed with him. I couldn't have made McClure a romantic lead. He was a severe, bullying officer who once gave his cook 48 lashes for swearing. But I find him fascinating, because his private letters and expedition diaries also reveal him to be a lonely, yearning, rather funny man who was fond of animals and suffered terrible stomachaches. I could write a whole novel about him, though the tone would be very different.

The other expats, especially Maggie and Arthur, absolutely stole my heart. Were these characters based on real figures as well, or more general research about their time periods?

The other expats are all entirely fictional! For Maggie and Arthur, I chose the Great Plague of London and the First World War because these events occupy such a major place in the British collective imagination. Given that one of the things I was keen to explore in the book is the way that history, as a narrative construct, informs national and personal identity, I wanted to offer them as representatives from British history who in fact completely break from stereotype and expectation.

Any scene involving Maggie took the longest to write because I wanted to get her language right. I'm particularly proud of "pizzle-headed doorknob."

What is your favorite piece of research that did (or didn't) make it into the book?

I extrapolated a lot about Graham's personality from Robert McClure's 1836–7 diary. They sailed together as part of an earlier Arctic expedition (which was successful, in that it came back with most of its crew alive). One of my favorite discoveries was that Graham—then 26—kept himself occupied by growing peas in coal dust. When they were harvested, he gave them to a sailor who was dying of scurvy in a sick bay. According to McClure, the poor fellow enjoyed them very much. There's also the story of Graham cross-dressing . . . but I'll save that for another time.

How did you decide on the way that time travel works within your world? When did the image of a door between times come to you?

For me, the core part of the time-door is not the doorframe, which is just a receptacle, but the actual machine that catches and funnels time. Though it isn't seen until very late in the book, the reader knows by that time that it has been repeatedly mistaken for a weapon—and indeed, every time it's turned on, something awful happens to someone. Time travel, in this world, isn't a matter of cutting a door in space-time and stepping into another era; there are grisly consequences for using it. The machine is a technology, a tool that can be violently exploited, like gunpowder or the split atom.

I was so taken with the concepts of "hereness" and "thereness" with the expats, and the implication that surveillance systems could only pick them up depending on how moored they were within their new time period. Can you talk about where this idea came from?

Thank you! I was inspired by a beautiful and important book, Time Lived, Without Its Flow by Denise Riley, which was written in the aftermath of the death of Riley's son. It is an extended meditation on the ways that grief can take you out of the normative flow of time, so you exist in a different, frozen version of time to the people around you—there, not here. I was also thinking about the idea of a lost home that exists only in memory or stories, like Victorian Britain or pre-Khmer Rouge Cambodia. Even when those places are no longer "here," they are always just "there," in retelling, just out of reach.

As with the time-door, the physiological consequences of time travel, of choosing to be "here" or "there" and so visible or invisible to modern surveillance technology, can also be exploited. Imagine a spy who can be invisible on CCTV! If you want to be a good immigrant—whether from another country or another era—to what extent should you allow yourself to be exploited by your host state? As Y-Dang Troeung says in her memoir, Landbridge, the question asked of refugees is never "Are you grateful?" but "How grateful are you?"

Food is such a vital part of how Gore attempts to relate to his bridge. What drew you to food (and cigarettes) as a way to build the connection between them?

Almost every meal cooked by Graham in the book is one that my fiancé has cooked for me or that I've cooked for him. (I also stole some of my fiancé's jokes for Graham, such as calling electric scooters "a coward's vehicle.") They are meals that remind me of what it feels like to be in love. Rather less romantically, The Ministry of Time started as a silly piece of wish fulfillment, to bring my favorite polar explorer into the present day, and among other wishes I would like to fulfill, I would really really really really really really REALLY like to have a cigarette. Imagine being a Victorian and getting to chain-smoke all day without knowing about the consequences. Dreamy.

Author Biography

Kaliane Bradley is a British-Cambodian writer and editor based in London. Her short fiction has appeared in Somesuch Stories, The Willowherb Review, Electric Literature, Catapult, and Extra Teeth, among others. She was the winner of the 2022 Harper's Bazaar Short Story Prize and the 2022 V.S. Pritchett Short Story Prize.

https://www.simonandschuster.com/authors/Kaliane-Bradley/210566975

Reviews

The Ministry of Time by Kaliane Bradley review – a seriously fun sci-fi romcom

A bureaucrat in near-future London finds love with a Victorian Arctic explorer in a thrilling debut that takes a deep dive into human morality

For a book to be good – really good, keep it on your shelf for ever good – it has to be two things: fun and a stretch. You have to need to know what happens next; and you have to feel like a bigger or better version of yourself at the end. Airport thrillers are almost always fun; much contemporary autofiction is just a stretch, largely because it's very hard for a book in which not much happens to be a page-turner. What a thrill, then, to come to Kaliane Bradley's debut, The Ministry of Time, a novel where things happen, lots of them, and all of them are exciting to read about and interesting to think about.

Bradley's book is also serious, it must be said – or, at least, covers serious subjects. The British empire, murder, government corruption, the refugee crisis, climate change, the Cambodian genocide, Auschwitz, 9/11 and the fallibility of the human moral compass all fall squarely within Bradley's remit. Fortunately, however, these vast themes are handled deftly and in deference to character and plot.

Billed as "speculative fiction", it is perhaps more cheering to think of it as 50% sci-fi thriller, and 50% romcom. The Ministry of Time is chiefly a love story between a disaffected civil servant working in a near-future London, and Commander Graham Gore, first lieutenant of Sir John Franklin's ill-fated expedition to the Arctic. Gore, last seen grimly walking across the ice in 1847, has been retrieved from the jaws of death by a 21st-century government hellbent on testing the limits of time travel.

Despite its vast scope, The Ministry of Time reads like a novel that was written for pleasure

Gore is one of their "expats": people brought through time and subjected not just to a barrage of tests but the tumult of the 21st century (traffic lights, acknowledging the atrocities of the British empire, Instagram). The expats have some problems with "hereness and thereness": they don't register, necessarily, on an MRI scan or an airport scanner. What is a person? What is time? How can the answers to these questions further our geopolitical interests?

Each expat has been assigned a "bridge": part companion, part zookeeper, part researcher. The bridges share their homes, their lives – and perhaps more – but must file complete reports on every aspect of their new "friend" to an increasingly sinister HQ. Ursula K Le Guin wrote that the job of sci-fi was "to extrapolate imaginatively from current trends and events to a near-future that's half prediction, half satire". It is impossible to read The Ministry of Time and not feel that we are, in fact, mere years from "nose-bleeder" heatwaves, microchipped refugees and a government at war with itself.

One test of good sci-fi is how quickly the central premise, however fantastic, becomes so obviously true to both character and reader that the plot is permitted to move itself without any further conscious suspension of disbelief. The space blasters, or whatever, must feel as real as the people; and the people must not be left behind in the author's quest to accurately describe (to quote Raymond Chandler) the poltexes and disintegrators and secondary timejectors. The Ministry of Time needs no such ritzy shortcuts: when the blue lights and lasers emerge, we have earned them.

The test of a good romance novel is, in some ways, the same. Cliche is a feature, not a bug; readers expect a certain set of beats, played to a certain rhythm. Girl meets boy; boy and girl fall in love over one hot summer; complications (in this case, guns, governments and an age gap of 200 years) ensue. The couple must kiss; and, while a happy ending is not mandatory (luckily for Bradley), there must be some sense of hope.

This is – astonishingly – a hopeful book. Much as our narrator would like us to believe chiefly in her failures, ultimately she exists around them and through them as a person in her own right. A nameless bureaucrat, through the course of the novel she (as she puts it of Gore) "fills out with attributes like a daguerreotype developing". This is our hope, then, in the novel as in life: that people should become more than they thought they were. Life is worth living; and love is worth fighting for; and our characters – hereness and thereness notwithstanding – can and must do it. Won't they? Would you? These are the big questions, and Bradley smuggles them in, concealed amid a breakneck plot just as the time outlaws hide among suburban London streets.

For, despite its vast scope, The Ministry of Time reads like a novel that was written for pleasure. The acknowledgments reveal that the story began life as a joke for a handful of friends – and while it is not always true that a joy to write is a joy to read, this is the kind of summer romp that also sparks real thought. While Bradley's writing can veer towards the glib, go with it: give in to the tide of this book, and let it pull you along. It's very smart; it's very silly; and the obvious fun never obscures completely the sheer, gorgeous, wild stretch of her ideas.

theguardian.com/books/2024/may/03/the-ministry-of-time-by-kaliane-bradley-review-a-seriously-fun-sci-fi-romcom