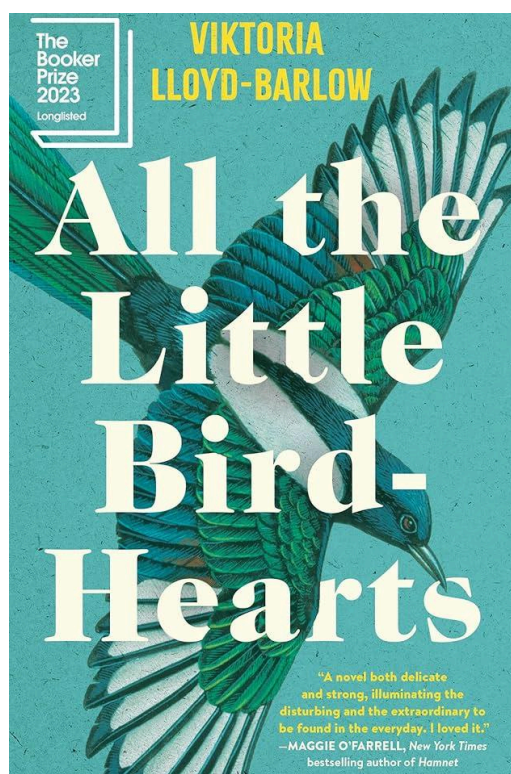


September 2025

Extracts from Chicago Review of Books and Guardian Review: This is the author's debut and was longlisted for the 2023 Booker prize. She left school without any qualifications before gaining a degree, then a PhD as a mature student. While she is herself on the autism spectrum, the word "autistic" is never used in relation to Sunday. This can be attributed to the time, set in 1988 when autism remains under diagnosed, especially in women. It is also due to stigmatization of neurodiversity, as Sunday is frequently maligned for her social differences.



The novel is told from Sunday's first-person perspective, allowing readers to experience the world through the eyes of an autistic character, highlighting how she perceives and processes information differently.

Sunday whispers a Sicilian proverb, admires the fields that rise above her Lake District home and notices a stranger lying on next door's lawn. This is Vita, her bold and sophisticated clothes hanging on her elegant frame, her hands raised skywards, "as though waiting for expected gifts". The novel is a sharp, watchful account of the intense friendship that builds between these two very different women.

Confident, charming, privileged Vita has moved to Sunday's small town from London. Sunday, like the author, is autistic. Social interactions perplex her, and she is happier calming her twitching hands in the "dark and silky soil" of the greenhouses where

she works. She believes there is "a universal code to be broken, a pattern to be understood", and uses two books – a 1950s guide to etiquette and a book of Sicilian folk tales – to navigate life, often repeating their lessons in company. She favours white food, cannot read clocks, and turns down any drink that is not cold and fizzy.

Vita is delighted with her quirky new friend, and Sunday bathes in the warm light of her attention. She and her daughter Dolly start visiting Vita and her husband Rollo for weekly suppers. Sunday's sixteen-year-old daughter, Dolly, is eyeing life beyond her socially awkward mother and spends more and more time with the glamorous Vita. Soon Dolly is barely at home and Sunday, as so often in her life, is excluded. The sugar rush of her friendship with Vita sours as she – and the reader – start to wonder exactly what it is her "soft-feathered and sharp-eyed" neighbour is hoping to get out of the friendship.

Sunday tells her story with thoughtful, matter-of-fact verve. She speaks of the "grateful and covetous way" hands greet warm tea, of the "undisturbed grease" that makes a caged

magpie's wings shine, of motherhood awakening emotions "both furious and tender". There's always an edge: trauma, growing menace, the fear of loss felt by a mother whose daughter has been leaving her behind since the day she was born. Coupled with Sunday's strained relationship with her daughter, it is clear that despite Sunday's discomfort with social norms, she craves intimacy and is blind to the deception behind Vita's friendship. Dolly's disregard of her mother's thoughts and feelings is heartbreaking. While much of her distance, choosing the company of peers over that of her mother, feels like normal teenage behaviour, it veers into cruelty when she befriends Vita and slowly distances herself from her mother, poking fun at her mother's various habits and leaving her mother's love unacknowledged.

As the novel advances via childhood flashbacks and a terrifying garden party, we see both the scars Sunday bears, and the cracks in the armour worn by the more artful members of the cast.

Comments: Beautiful poetic language. Writing was simple and beautiful. Felt as if you were in Sunday's head. Could feel her struggle. Saw her world from the inside. Found Vita and Rollo very clichéd. The end was rushed and disappointing. No strong sense of place. Uneven pace. Felt somewhat overtaxed emotionally by this book and its insight into ASD. Evoked feelings of discomfort, heartbreak, sense of tragedy.

Ratings: Lynda, Ida, Pauline, Jenny, Hetta - 3.5, Nicola, Janet, Sandy, Viv, Margie - 3

Other Books We Read

Afterlives by Abdulrazak Gurnah, 4.5
The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath, 4
Exposed, the Greek and Roman Body by Caroline Vout, 3
Orlando by Virginia Woolf, 4
The Waves by Virginia Woolf, 4
Juice by Tim Winton, 4
The Shepherd's Hut by Tim Winton, 4.5
Summertime by J.M. Coetzee, 4
The Sound of One Hand Clapping by Richard Flanagan, 4
Unfinished Business by Shankari Chandran, 3.5
When the Crocodile Eats the Sun by Peter Godwin, 3
Half a Life by V.S. Naipaul, 2.5
Oblivion: A Memoir by Hector Abad Faciolince, 4.5
Flesh by David Szalay, 3.5
Seascraper by Benjamin Wood, 4
Spring Rain by Mark Hamer, 3.5
Another Life by Kristin Hannah, 3.5
The Watchtower by Elizabeth Harrower, 3