



The People in the Trees

Hanya Yanagihara

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In 1950, a young doctor called Norton Perina signs on with the anthropologist Paul Tallent for an expedition to the remote Micronesian island of Ivu'ivu in search of a rumored lost tribe. They succeed, finding not only that tribe but also a group of forest dwellers they dub "The Dreamers," who turn out to be fantastically long-lived but progressively more senile. Perina suspects the source of their longevity is a hard-to-find turtle; unable to resist the possibility of eternal life, he kills one and smuggles some meat back to the States. He scientifically proves his thesis, earning worldwide fame and the Nobel Prize, but he soon discovers that its miraculous property comes at a terrible price. As things quickly spiral out of his control, his own demons take hold, with devastating personal consequences.

The People in the Trees Details

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From Reader Review The People in the Trees for online ebook

Zanna says

I have to hand it to Yanagihara here for writerly discipline. Perhaps writing in the voice of an unsympathetic elderly man comes naturally to her, but crafting this into something convincing or at least artfully contrived is an impressive feat, and resisting the temptation to intervene in author voice wouldn't have been possible for me!

I suppose with whatever I'm reading I ask myself: Is this literature critical? Yanagihara's book traverses difficult territory, the dangerous grounds of child abuse and colonisation, and I wondered what she wanted me to think, what her angle was, behind Perina and Ron, and whether it was *safe*. The sharp unravelling in the postscript of the text's meticulously constructed ambiguity should have made her intentions easier to read, but certainly, I felt, left open many avenues of reflection I'd been wandering down, on the implications of aging populations and the ethics of big pharma.

I wish I knew more about anthropology, since its representatives here, Paul and Esme, are weirdly, humourously distorted through the highly unreliable prism of the narrator's perceptions. Yanagihara certainly does not romanticise 'primitive' culture here, but Perina's clinical, even sociopathic descriptions are suspect. Alternative views are hinted at, and though I itched for more of them, I respected the decision to leave well alone (perhaps a deliberately exemplary gesture. Ultimately, the book was as uncomfortable as, say, *Lolita*, and raised toothsome questions without pushing answers. The setting provided strange, unsettling pleasures. A good read for me.

Lee says

It had to've taken more than 18 days to read this. Read it after *A Little Life* -- author said somewhere that her second novel was a response to this one, the story of the abused, not the abuser. Her novels are like 10+-mile runs: they're worth it and filled with wonderful moments but also there are always times when I want them to end. I admire this for the steady descriptive tone, the lush island atmosphere, the invented vocab perfectly deployed, the dual unreliable narrators, the boldness of some of it, and most importantly the imagination and ambition, especially for a first novel. After the first 80 or so pages, I was thinking this seemed like the dictionary-definition example of a novel that didn't need its frame (a prologue explaining the scientist's discovery and later trouble with the law and imprisonment), but by the final 50 pages I appreciated the structure. Throughout, it's also a top-notch example of seeing around an unreliable narrator -- realizing that there's more to the story than a narrator reveals. Lots of narrative drive since we know upfront that the scientist narrator Norton has been arrested for pedophilia, so we're waiting for those bits to come up, but they're not really even introduced as a theme until maybe 200+ pages into it. Not at all as graphic as "*A Little Life*," not even close -- other than the islander's ritual, described with something like a cross between poetic engagement and anthropological detachment, it's all suggested (view spoiler). Like "*A Little Life*," it's clear she's concerned with matching structure to story. Loved the section edited out as a footnote and then allowed at the very end -- changes pretty much everything. Innocence and experience. Socialization and sodomy. Rape of island and child. Closeted '50s sexuality/sensibility -- almost a sort of historical novel that way. Norton didn't strike me as such an obvious monster, as derided in many reviews. He's not exaggerated, in any case. He's believable. The author, as in her second novel, does a great job presenting the complexity of character and situation. Will definitely read whatever she writes next.

Imi says

Thoughts immediately after finishing:

I have just finished the last page and those who have already read this will understand exactly what I am mean when I say I feel shaken. I don't want to write too much and don't know yet if I will be able to write a spoiler-free review. I need some time to think. But it is so important you experience this book as Yanagihara intended.

After a few days recovery:

I am never going to be able to get this book out of my head. After having a bit more time to think, I think I am able to write a little more about why it hit me so deeply without giving too much away, because as I said above, you must experience this book as it is written without any spoilers and preconceptions.

If *A Little Life* is anywhere near as flawlessly crafted as her debut novel, then Yanagihara deserves every bit of praise she has received. Not having read that one yet, I can't comment on that myself or how it compares with *The People in the Trees*, but I'm certainly very eager to read more by Yanagihara soon after being utterly blown away by the level of skill and thought that has gone into creating this marvellous book. The development and characterisation of the protagonist, Norton Perina, a Noble-prize winning scientist, is simply perfect from start to finish. This is aided by the fantastic use of narrative structure: Norton's memoirs, naturally in first person, take up the largest part of the novel, but this is accompanied by an introduction and closing chapter written by Norton's friend and colleague, who also edited and annotated the memoirs with footnotes. I don't want to give away exactly why this structure works so well, but, trust me on this, it's a perfect fit.

If you asked me to be really picky, at some point in the middle, after Norton returns from his first visit in Ivu'ivu, I had begun to feel the book was losing steam. This was after being so captivated with the novel's beginning, Norton's early life and his arrival in Ivu'ivu. Well, this slight lull ended up not mattering at all, as the final third kicks it up a notch and takes the book in a direction I never could have predicted ((view spoiler)). I was enthralled from this point on, until the ending which almost completely destroyed me emotionally.

I will say it now: this is not a book for everyone. Norton Perina is a deeply troubled and despicable individual and this novel explores the inner working of his mind in a way that is very disconcerting. I felt cheated, hoodwinked after the final page. The novel plays with and deceives the reader throughout in a way that's clever, but pretty cruel. It goes without saying, that this book is dark, unsettling and often sickening. The novel also may be in need of a major trigger warning for (view spoiler), in particular, but it also covers several other themes that are deeply troubling: (view spoiler).

However, for me personally, *The People in the Trees* is a literary masterpiece. I have not had such a strong emotional reaction to a book in a long time. This powerful book, and the many questions it raised, will certainly stay with me for a long time. I simply cannot stop thinking about it or recommend it highly enough.

Sharon says

There was something so wrong about this book. Reading it was like some sort of slow, pervy foreplay to the final #shockingnotshocking pages. I think I hated this book. I hated it but was simultaneously impressed with it.

Spoiler territory below (You be the judge though because it's similar to Lars Von Trier's end-of-the-world

film *Melancholia*, where the opening scene is ...the end of the world. Similarly, all that is "revealed" in Yanagihara's story is written in her first few pages).

Newspaper clippings mark the beginning of *The People In the Trees* and promise a story of intrigue, adventure and high drama. We learn the following: A scientist, Dr. Norton Perina, embarks on a journey to the remote desert island Ivu'ivu and uncovers a lost tribe that doesn't appear to age. While there, Perina discovers the secret of extending a human lifespan: a rare turtle's blood. Back in America, Perina rises to fame when he publishes his studies, but ultimately, faces 1) disapproval from his colleagues who say he has ruined the island (and a species), and 2) criticism from the scientific community due detrimental side effects of ingesting the blood. Perina returns to the island multiple times over the years--racked with guilt, to make amends, to find peace, you name it--each time, adopting more of the island's children--up to 40. ...one of which ultimately accuses him of sexual abuse.

...This is all covered in the first few pages via the clippings. The actual narrative is in the form of Perina's memoirs, edited by Perina's colleague, Dr. Kubodera (it's clear from the onset that Kubodera is one of Perina's few remaining friends, most of whom desert him once the assault charges are publicized). Kubodera, being the non-judgmental chap he is, volunteers to review Perina's memoirs while he's killing time in the slammer. He also takes the liberty of adding footnotes to Perina's story where he deems necessary. As the novel progresses, the footnotes become more and more significant, where--in Kubodera's methodical, systematic prose--he glosses over a suicide, what becomes of the natives of the island... It's all very fitting that the last few pages of the novel are a footnote.

Despite the initial strong hook, I was ultimately disappointed by how dull certain sections were once I was actually *in* them: When Perina is in medical school, I couldn't wait for him to get to Ivu'ivu, when we get to the island, I couldn't wait for him to discover the people, when he discovers the people, I couldn't wait for him to discover the turtles. And so on and so on.

Then there's the subject matter. The story is *really* fucking challenging in terms of content! What is Yanagihara ultimately even trying to say? There are themes of colonialism, superiority, abuse, justification, the neverending quest, inaccessibility. But in the end, it's literally a story about rape. The rape of a people, the rape of a land, the rape of nature. The ugliness and assertiveness of man. The consequences.

I can't just crap all over Yanagihara's book. This *is* the lady that gifted us *A Little Life*. Her prose dazzle. When we make it to the jungle, it's a menacing, claustrophobic landscape: *I walked fifteen minutes to the west of the camp and then took a right at a particularly vicious-looking orchid, whose urinous blooms spat out two long, spiraling stamens the color of fresh blood.* The narration--removed, exact, straightforward--is spot on for a scientist's memoirs, and impressed me all the more due to its 180 degree divergence from *A Little Life*.

Some might say that Perina (and Kubodera) were unreliable narrators, but I disagree. One has all the information needed from the get-go to see who both characters are. I liken Perina to Patricia Highsmith's Tom Ripley in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*--you just bloody know something's off.

A challenging read: at times due to style, but 100 percent in terms of subject matter.

Marjorie says

After reading this author's second book, "A Little Life", I knew she was an author who wouldn't disappoint. So of course I had to read her debut book, "The People in the Trees". Once again I was completely blown

away.

This is the story of Norton Perina, a young scientist who is asked by an anthropologist, Paul Tallent, to travel to the island of Ivu'ivu to search for a lost tribe of natives. Not only is the lost tribe discovered but Perina also discovers that some of this tribe has lived for centuries due to the eating of the Opa'ivu'eke turtle, for which discovery he wins the Nobel Prize. What he also discovers is that the immortality obtained comes at a terrible price to those who eat this turtle. The author expertly touches on moral and ethical issues throughout the book and shows the terrible harm that is sometimes done in the name of science.

We know from the start of the book that Norton has been disgraced and accused of child molestation. There are actually two narrators of the book. Norton is writing his memoir and telling his own story. Also commenting throughout the book is his close friend and research fellow, Dr. Kubodera. Dr. Kubodera adds many footnotes to Norton's memoir; however, in the e-book format, the footnotes are all at the end of each section, which sections are quite long, so it's impossible by the time you get to the footnotes to remember what they're referring to. The footnotes and comments by Dr. Kubodera did lend a feeling of credibility to the book, though, and made the story feel as though it were true. I caught myself several times thinking that I'd have to look that up on the internet as though it had actually happened. To my surprise, after reading the book, I learned that the author based her story on an actual person, Daniel Gajdusek, a friend of her family and similarly disgraced Nobel Prize winner, which makes this book even more shocking.

This is a chilling, spellbinding book that held me in its thrall. I do highly recommend it, though do caution that it contains some very disturbing scenes. What makes these scenes even more horrifying is the rationalizations given so smoothly by the narrators. There's an evil worm crawling through these pages and while chills run up and down your spine, you won't be able to look away. Hanya Yanagihara is a force to be reckoned with in the literary world. I'm looking forward to what she comes up with next.

Vanessa says

There's something so special about Hanya Yanagihara's writing even when she's writing about harrowing or off putting subjects. She has such an ability to get into the marrow of her characters and she's not afraid to explore the ugly side of human nature.

I was taken completely by surprise as I was uncertain if I was entering another 'A Little Life' vortex (that book was nearly the death of me) but this book felt like a different author altogether, the topic and scene couldn't be further from what I was expecting, far removed from NYC life although some connecting themes and tone of writing were similar. This book drew me in, the mere fact of its strangeness and how the story unfolds was fascinating and intriguing. I wasn't sure where the book was leading but I felt a real sick pleasure in how Hanya finished the book. It was brilliant. It's twisted and sinister and awful in all kinds of ways. The only criticism I felt was the last half, the adopting of all the tribe children, I found it all became abit over the top outlandish up until that part I felt that the book read (almost) believable. I could go on for days about this book and this author but I'll spare you. I just feel overly compelled to sing the praises and marvel at her confidence as a author. This was her debut! Incredible and awe inspiring.

Leanne says

One of the best books I've read this year - complex and unsettling but so brilliantly crafted. I was both disappointed and intrigued to find out this was a fictional version of an actual Nobel Prize-winning scientist's life; on one hand, I thought it was such an interesting narrative and am a tiny bit less impressed to know that Yanagihara didn't fully come up with the ideas herself, but on the other, it's shocking and fascinating to know that this was actually someone's *life*.

I've been interested in anthropology since I read Lily King's *Euphoria* earlier this year, and *The People in the Trees* focuses on that topic but encompasses so much more - moral ambiguity is everywhere here, and I could never quite figure out which side I agreed with. In some ways, Norton Perina is an abhorrent figure, but he is just so realistically flawed and human that you can't help but feel sympathetic towards him and even understand (some) of his motives.

I also loved the structure - the novel opens with several newspaper articles detailing Norton's legal struggles and gives a high level summary of his career and accomplishments, followed by an introduction by Perina's close friend, colleague, and probably his biggest fan, Ronald Kubodera, who has edited and annotated Norton's memoirs, which make up the majority of the remainder of the text. Ronald's footnotes are rarely dry (as I often find with footnotes), and instead add texture and useful information, both technical and personal, to Norton's life story. He also provides the closing chapter, which just hits you with a bang.

I haven't been able to forget about it, and have now made Yanagihara's *A Little Life* a reading priority. By all accounts it's just as (maybe even more so) masterfully done, and I'm very excited by the prospect of a new favourite author.

Justin Evans says

Please explain to me why so few of my friends have read this book. It's a triumph of style--not 'voice,' not 'authentic expression,' but style. PT is, for the most part, the 'memoirs' of a medical anthropologist, Norton Perina. He is one of the great characters of this young century, and Yanagihara's ability to write in his slightly ludicrous way is an absolutely astonishing feat of literary irony.

The book's plot is glorious, as well; a little slow at the beginning, which I think is true for most well-plotted books, but ultimately perfectly balanced. Consider for a moment how rare it is to find even a moderately well-written book that is also a well plotted book. Please, buy a copy of PT and read it.

And it deals, intelligently and without condescending at all, with some of the most important ideas of our time: environmentalism, neo-colonialism, scientism, naturalism, the craving for roots, and, most of all, the difficulty of reconciling two things most of us know/feel to be true, i.e., i) that we live in an historically changing world, which is also home to many, many cultures, all of them adhering to different ethical codes; and, ii) that there are some moral truths.

But, mostly, I can't get over the formal perfection of the book. We know Norton from his first sentences: he affects tolerance, objectivity and wisdom, but is actually self-deluded. As the text unwinds, we see the delusion wind its way through the story; he is no ordinary unreliable narrator. Norton is the unreliable narrator *as scientist*, presenting us with facts and the results of experiments, proving his perceptions with

every paragraph--but we know it is all false. The novel doesn't ask us to question the narrator's truthfulness; it asks us to question the truthfulness of the world that produces men like the narrator.

You can get at very important truths with the scientific method. You can also get at some very important truths using art, distance, and, most importantly, irony. And I can't do justice to how well Yanagihara does it, in this review, try as I might.

Carolyn O says

Hanya Yanigahara's *The People in the Trees* is the most disturbing novel I've read in years, and simultaneously one of the most beautiful.

The People in the Trees

Seeing the look on my face when I was most of the way through the novel, my husband asked, "Are you reading horror?"

"No," I said, "but it's pretty frightening."

"Well, the title is creepy."

And so it went.

The epigraph to *The People in the Trees* comes from *The Tempest* (4.1), when Prospero inveighs against what he sees as Caliban's fundamental intractability, his resistance to civilization (that is, both civilization itself and being civilized, none too humanely, by Prospero). It's an apt choice for Ms. Yanagihara's narrative of science, immortality, destruction, ethics, and exploration itself.

The novel is composed of the memoirs of Norton Perina, framed by a preface and epilogue penned by his colleague and friend, Ronald Kubodera, who provides insight and explication with academic footnotes throughout the text. Perina, a doctor, is part of a small group that discovers a "lost" tribe on the fictional island of Ivu'ivu, with disastrous consequences for the islanders and, ultimately, for Perina himself. (By the way, I suggest that you do not read the jacket copy before you begin reading the novel itself — spoilers abound.)

Perina's voice is compelling — both suave and vicious, aware of his personal shortcomings and willfully blind to his greatest moral failings. Kubodera, though trying to protect his mentor and justify his life's work (and his own), consistently undercuts Perina's attempt to appear as if he is withholding nothing, giving the reader the unvarnished truth. And maybe, in some sick way, Perina thinks he is delivering his own truth.

The horrors the novel presents are juxtaposed with the lush (there's no other word) descriptions of the fantastical plants and creatures of Ms. Yanagihara's invention. Even the few words of the U'ivuan language that Perina shares are musical and perfectly suited to the environment of the story.

As a child, I remember learning in school that the rainforest ought to be protected so that it would remain available for future study. When I read this novel, it occurred to me, after all these years, that perhaps we should be protecting it, and all the other wild places of the world, from study. After all, wouldn't Caliban have been better off without Prospero?

Catriona (LittleBookOwl) says

TRIGGER WARNING: sexual assault

This was definitely an interesting and unsettling book.

I wouldn't say that a lot of what happened necessarily shocked me due to the characterisation of the main character. Since we are inside Norton's head, as a reader you are almost inclined to sympathise with him, but he is so unlikeable and I didn't agree with many of his actions. But his story was just so captivating and intriguing.

Jennifer (aka EM) says

[Yanagihara gives the reader every clue she needs, implicit and explicit, to draw the inevitable conclusion from the outset - yet the ending will, I bet, still hit you with a wallop. (hide spoiler)]

Julianne (Outlandish Lit) says

6 Reasons Why The People in the Trees is Perfect

1. // It's a book within a book.

Maybe it's just me, but I'm delighted whenever this happens. If you're a little hesitant, fear not. This is no gimmick. There is no better way this strange story could be told. The book is framed as Norton Perina's memoir that he's writing from jail. The introduction, editing, and footnotes are done by his friend, Ronald. At one point, Norton Perina says about his life:

"...I have found that contemplating the events of that year becomes tolerable only when I consider them as things that happened long ago and to someone else--some series of misfortunes and tragedies that befell someone I once admired and had read about in a dusty book in a grand, stone-floored library somewhere far away, where there was no sound, no light, no movement but for my own breath, and my fingers clumsily turning the rough-cut pages."

That's what reading this book feels like. And it's a glorious feeling.

2. // There are unreliable narrator(s).

Remember Ronald who edits the memoir? He admits to being biased toward Norton Perina, as they're friends, and he also says that he has edited things out that seem unnecessary. That paired with a main character whose only focus seems to be success and who is in jail for a horrible crime he says he didn't commit? You always have to be on your toes as you read this story. Not all is as it seems.

3. // There are some disturbed characters.

As Yanagihara proved this year with *A Little Life*, she can take you to some dark places in her books. And

the darkest places are within the minds of her characters, which she creates so richly and thoughtfully. The complexity of these people is revealed so subtly, it feels like you're discovering secrets as you read. Every revelation about a character is well placed and well timed. Norton Perina is a troubling individual on so many different levels and I love that.

4. // Hanya Yanagihara's writing is so immersive.

I really don't know how she does it. I mean a lot of it has to do with the context of this being a memoir that you're reading, but you get completely immersed in the story and the characters she has created. Her written landscaping of this fictional island is so in depth and atmospheric, you can feel the heat and darkness and claustrophobia of the jungle. None of the weirder plot points took me out of the story at all; they only helped to suck me in.

5. // It's also really beautiful.

My arms cramped up from how many paragraphs I typed up. Because it's written as a memoir by a scientist with extensive footnotes, it looks and feels like it should be dense. I'm not going to say you can race through it in one sitting, but there was no point in this book that I was bored. Yanagihara's prose is so lyrical. I mean, look at this.

"I stood periodically and listened to the dry palm fronds chattering against one another like bones, and to the ocean, its remorseless, lonely conversation with itself, a sound that—though I did not know it at the time—I would not hear again for months to come."

6. // Physical immortality is acquired through eating mystical turtles.

Ok, this isn't always criteria for me, but it's definitely a bonus. Despite how human the plot is, the fantastical elements really take it up a notch. The discovery of "The Dreamers" (the people who are 100+ years old, but incommunicable due to mental deterioration) is so intense. Not knowing how many more are in the jungle is more so. The tribe of islanders and their customs are fascinating. The folklore behind the turtles that provide physical immortality is so interesting to read. All of these strange elements adds a richness through its inventiveness and layering, and it only helps magnify the the real life issues: exploration, globalization, mortality, progress, ego, etc.

Read full review: <http://outlandishlit.blogspot.com/201...>

Elaine says

I should have written a review closer in time to having read this, but it's been nuts!

I had a particular interest in the book, based on a slight personal connection. I had a close college friend who was related to Dr. D. Carleton Gadjusek, the Nobel-prize winning scientist who adopted dozens of children from Micronesia, and was eventually convicted of child molestation and died in disgraced exile. That story provides the precise template for all of this book except the science. Anyway, I have a vivid memory of meeting a couple of Dr. Gadjusek's children when they visited my friend at college - the thing that stuck in my mind was how boyish they seemed - their chronological ages didn't fit their small stature and young-seeming demeanor, and I seem to recall that they came out drinking with us, and it was hard for me to adjust to since they seemed so young. At that time, I was fascinated by what seemed like a noble but overwhelming

project - how does one raise 50 children - and I wanted to understand more, but really didn't grasp the dynamic. When the headlines came several years, I was very saddened for my friend, but struck again by the mystery of how 50+ children make a family - and puzzled as to what had actually happened at that house in Maryland.

So, I was interested to see what Yanagihara made of this unique story. Unfortunately, while she paints a chilling portrait of Dr. Perina (the fictional Gadjusek), a sociopath who enjoys killing mice and who is viscerally repulsed by women (and silently gay), I felt the book plodded, and didn't do justice to the fascination of its source material. While the child molestation story frames the book, Yanigahara seems actually more interested in the scientific parable she tells of immortality, innocence and destruction. But for me, those parts of the book just dragged - we have pages upon pages of descriptions of the jungle, with little pay off. Then when the story of the children, the adoptions, family life, accusations etc. finally come - it is very rushed and seems disconnected from the rest of the book.

I may be a bit unfair. I read this book while traveling, and was very distracted.

Meike says

Dr. Abraham Norton Perina, a brilliant scientist, won a Nobel Prize in 1974 for discovering the Selene syndrome, a condition that retards aging - almost 25 years later, the Micronesian island where he found the key to what seemed to be eternal life has been utterly exploited by Western pharmaceutical companies, the indigenous civilization has been destroyed, and Norton himself was sentenced to prison for sexually abusing his adopted children.

Yanagihara gives us the complete outline of her story right at the beginning, and then takes her readers on an unsettling, dark and fascinating journey through Norton's life and, most importantly, his mind: From his childhood to university to his work in a lab for animal testing and from there on into the Micronesian jungle and finally to the house in which he lived with more than 40 adopted indigenous children. The story is told mainly from Norton's perspective, and he is unapologetic about all the havoc he has caused: From his point of view, he did what every scientist would have done, he would do it again without hesitation, and before he met the children, they were less than dogs in their third world poverty, he rationalizes.

This author is just brilliant when it comes to psychological writing, and this tale is so gripping and thought-provoking that I could hardly put it down. Norton has some doubts regarding the consequences of his actions, but as he severely lacks empathy with other people and living creatures in general, his self-image is distorted: He is not interested in feelings or morals, he wants to know, explore, dominate. And then there's the question whether intellectual brilliance excuses anything - this book seems to become more timely by the minute. This is a harsh critique of Western exploitation, the way the West (including the scientific community) looks at other cultures and the way science and capitalism go hand in hand.

This would have gotten 5 stars from me if it weren't for the last chapter, the "missing chapter" from the book Norton wrote- this last piece answers all questions in a very direct way, although at that point, every attentive reader already grasped what must have happened due to the many clues throughout the book. This was Yanagihara's debut, so maybe she didn't trust herself enough - she could have though, because this is a fantastic book.

Pamela Barrett says

When I'm going to review a book, I don't read other reviews, so that they don't color my opinion. I do read what the publisher or editor sends out, and what the book cover synopsis states about the author and story. But in this case I wish I had read something more, so that I could have been cautioned about what this story was really about. I thought I was getting an adventure story about a young doctor and an anthropologist, who discover a lost tribe in the jungles of an island; based on a true story and similar to some books I've read.

My first clue that something ugly might be inside, was in the first few pages, before the preface, where there were some quotes (supposedly) from The Associated Press, and Reuters stating that the doctor (in later years) was arrested for rape, statutory rape, and endangering a minor. But after reading the preface by another doctor I thought maybe it was a false accusation. The second inkling I had that this was going to a dark disturbing place, happened in part 2 where he is starting medical school, experimenting on animals and conveying a complete lack of empathy in the suffering of the mice, dogs, and monkeys. Again I excused his behavior given the time period and the context of "all for the greater good of medical discoveries" that medical students and lab workers are exempt from; but this lack of empathy was a revealing look into his moral character. Then in the middle of the book, when they were finally in the jungle and made contact with the tribe; a child is raped, in a ceremony, as the doctor watches, observing, detached and justifying it as part of their culture. Enough already, this was sickening, and it makes me wonder about what publishers and editors consider "fresh new voices" and the best book of 2013; and why author's who have choices in the retelling of a "based on a true stories" have to go to this depth of graphic detail. I'm doing something I hate doing, because I love books, but this one is going to the dump. It gets 1 star, because I have to give it something.

Book Riot Community says

I was a ridiculously huge fan of Yanagihara's 2015 second novel, *A Little Life*, so I decided to read her debut. The two books are vastly different, sharing only a few similar themes. TPITT has shades of both *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, so if you're a Nabokov junkie, read it now. It also has two unreliable narrators, with one giving footnotes on the other. They are both pretty terrible people so if you're down for unlikable characters, read it now. But as for the meat of the book, this story of a scientist and a lost Micronesian tribe is about modern man and the way he taints everything he touches. It's also a look into the mind of a man who mistakes perversion for something good and noble. A book with big themes and big ambition. — Jessica Woodbury

from The Best Books We Read In May: <http://bookriot.com/2015/06/02/riot-r...>

Jean says

This is a debut novel, based on a true story which I found both fascinating and disturbing. As I began reading I was so intrigued with the writing and the story. It seemed so intelligently written and I went on this anthropological expedition to a remote Micronesian island, I was glued to each page. I could not put the book down. Then there were moments where things just got uncomfortable for me and I wondered if I was

going to end up hating this book. This did not happen, and that, to me, proves that this author handled the "uncomfortable" in such a way so that it was just another part of the story, and I continued to devour the book. Yes, there were times when I asked myself, "is that really possible?" How could a person, even back in the 50's when the rules were either not in place yet or at least, more lenient, go to a remote island and bring children back with him, to adopt, to the grand total of 41 over the years? Does a Nobel winner make that much money that money was never an issue in the raising and educating of all those children. Did they just raise themselves when he was away or so busy in his lab? There were many questions for me, but, is it fiction or loosely based on a true story? I don't know. That was a little confusing to me. Despite all that, I was fascinated with the time on the island with the natives, and the prospect of immortality - the fountain of youth! even, was riveting. And, the dreamers, oh my goodness, another case of how things were done back then, it was reminiscent of the insane asylums of the 50's. Of course, as stated on the book jacket, at what price scientific progress? If a great man does unspeakable things, is he still a great man? How do we reconcile a person's failings with his genius? Life is not simple, it never will be.

Yvonne says

I have been thinking about this book for a few days. If I was part of a book club, I would insist we read this and discuss it. Am thinking about starting a book club for that express purpose.

One of the many astonishing things about this book is that it is a first novel, written by a young woman who is obviously well versed in science and anthropology. Not that that in itself is astonishing, I just think it's such a big story, so well written and intriguing, that how can it be a first novel?

But the world is full of incredibly gifted writers and Hanya Yanagihara is one for sure.

This is the story of a speck of an island in the Pacific, the fictional U'ivu and particularly of it's nearby island relative Ivu'ivu. These islands are basically untouched, and in 1950 a fresh young doctor, Norton Perina arrives with the gifted anthropologist Paul Tallent and his team, to have an 'adventure' on these remote dots in the deep Pacific.

Paul Tallent has been there before and he is searching for an undiscovered tribe on the densely jungled, seemingly uninhabited Ivu'ivu. With permission from the king of U'ivu the team goes with three guides to explore Ivu'ivu. The reader is poised with the discovery team, anxiously awaiting the start of their journey and anxious to know what they will find, if anything.

Yanagihara has invented a whole culture, of course based on existing Micronesian cultures, but she has added her own touches of how the tribes developed and why. Descriptions of the jungle and it's habitation are amazing. Such is the strange flesh coloured hairy fruit called manama, which drops with a thud from the tree which bears it, to the ground and wiggles around. It wiggles because it is filled with white hunono worms which live in the fruit until such time as they mature and explode into butterflies.

The story is told by Norton who is the protagonist of the story. Norton tells his tale, moving from childhood on a farm with his twin brother Owen, going to medical school, Owen going on to major in American literature and later to become a poet. Norton's life is forever altered by his time on Ivu'ivu, and he goes on to become a ground breaking scientist, who wins the Nobel Prize for medicine and has his own laboratory for the rest of his career.

But oh, there is so much more. Norton is telling his story from prison. That is not a spoiler, the reader learns this very quickly. He has the time to look back over this life and relay the events that society already knows through all the sensational articles in major magazines and newspapers, in his own words from his own perspective.

What was most incredible for me is the description and story of the adventure and discoveries made during the 1950 excursion to Ivu'ivu. Yes, it doesn't spoil the story to know Norton and Tallent discover an previously unknown people. A very uncurious people, who have domesticated huge, hairy, tusked hogs as pets and trackers for their hunts. The descriptions of the people sitting around the fire having their evening meal while the enormous boars eat their meal alongside their masters who occasionally stroke their bristled backs is creepy.

There are many very creepy scenes in this book, descriptions of habitation or cultural practises that made me want to turn away, but of course I couldn't. The people are so 'off', they are 'strange' in a way that is just strange. And the habitation is dense, so alive, so brimming with life that it is almost grotesque. Yes that sounds odd, but I challenge you to disagree with me after you read the book.

Then there are the 'dreamers'. Speaking of creepy, the first encounter with one of these people, a woman whom Norton and Tallent christen Eve, is disturbing. The dreamers are people who don't live with tribe in the village on Ivu'ivu, but were clearly a part of the tribe at one time. What is the reason for their incredible physical health?

The mythology of U'ivu and Ivu'ivu centres around the sun, the sea and their good friend the Opa'ivu'eke, known to us as a huge turtle or tortoise. The Opa'ivu'eke plays a key role in the eventually very sad story of the people on Ivu'ivu. He is sacred and revered, and later in the story events escalate just the way they have in countless cultures. The white race in particular, has blundered into another country and decided to take what they want in the name of science and progress.

And so, in a book club discussion the questions such as, to what ethics is science held and in particular men of science, must be asked. What is moral, what is criminal? We know that our own governments have experimented on people in the name of science and medical progress under the caveat, to better humankind. Society today believes this is torture and we also view experimenting on animals as cruel and unnecessary. But years ago, this wasn't the case. Where would laboratories and experiments be without their subjects, be they mice, rats, monkeys, dogs or humans?

Personally I found the lengths that Norton goes to in the name of science, in the quest to learn a secret that could change humankind and make him a world success, revolting. And his inability to see and understand what everyone around him can is what makes him the man he is. His lack of respect combined with his belief of being smarter than everyone else costs him, but not nearly enough.

Oh Norton is, I will say kindly, an interesting character. Well drawn. A very unsympathetic, driven man, with a large ego and a lot of justification for his actions.

It adds a real edge to the story knowing that Norton is in prison for the sexual assault of one of his 40 odd adopted children. As he tells his story the reader is keen to learn his side of the sexual abuse accusations, and his role in the changes that are brought to the people and environment of Ivu'ivu and V'ivu.

Did Norton, the Nobel prize winning scientist and adopted father over 30 years to 40 odd children do what he is sent to prison for? Did he cause the destruction and demise of a people and a culture?

Read the book and find out.

Jill says

This book should begin with a caution: those who are uncomfortable with moral relativism and who prefer to

view the world in black-and-white should not take one step further. *The People of the Trees* is rife with moral ambiguity throughout, which makes it a particularly mesmerizing and mind-challenging debut.

A short Google search reveals that the book was inspired on real Nobel laureate Carleton Gajdusek. The book purports to be the memoir of celebrated scientist Norton Perina, edited by his colleague and admirer Ronald Kubodera, after Dr. Perina is jailed for the molestation of one of his many adopted children.

What we get is the compelling back story, as told by an unreliable narrator. Norton Perina travels to a Micronesian island, called Ivu'ivu, where an amazing discovery is made: this primitive culture contains humans who have been alive for hundreds of years, far exceeding the natural lifespan. Although their bodies are preserved, their minds deteriorate. The import of this discovery – dubbed Selene syndrome – has vast implications for Perina's career and reputation.

The questions that arise are vastly titillating: what happens when man aspires to be a god? When we encroach on the world of the gods, when we see what we are not meant to see, how can anything but disaster follow? Or to be even more direct: what price do we place on progress? What are we willing to sacrifice and forgive?

There is more to contemplate: how do we view a man with a great mind who is not so great in his personal life? Is he a legend or a monster? Should one, like Faust, sell his very soul for immortality? Does the very quest for the forbidden turn us into something less-than-human?

In creating a realistic novel, Hanya Yanagihara drives readers from their comfort zones. There are some very disturbing scenes of man's inhumanity to man...and man's inhumanity to the animal kingdom that trusts him. There are hints of misogyny and outright examples of colonialism. The book is meant to shake us out of complacency and is not meant for readers who are seeking "feel good" narratives.

If there is one problem with the book, it's the shift in tone as the book progresses. There's a bit of a disconnect between the professional Perina and the increasingly personal glimpses into Perina's amorality. That being said, there is bridge that connects and solidly addresses the discrepancy between scientific progress and ethics. This is a far more transformative and fully-realized novel than, say, Anne Patchett's *State of Wonder*, which tackles some of the same themes. It's a devastating look into depravity and darkness in the name of science...for those courageous readers who are willing to take that rewarding journey.

Maxwell says

With *The People in the Trees*, Hanya Yanagihara has no doubt secured her place in my list of 'favorite authors.' Not only are her stories blisteringly original and masterfully written, but they point out so many things that make us human with conviction and honesty. When I read her second novel *A Little Life*, I was appalled and yet incredibly moved by the dark, disturbing tale she wove. And with *The People in the Trees*, her debut novel--and a powerhouse one at that--I am convinced that Yanagihara has staying power and is quite possibly the only writer I know who can make you enjoy so immensely stories about such troubled people.

Norton Perina, Nobel Prize winning scientist and accused pedophile (don't worry, all this is covered within the first dozen pages or so of the novel), is writing his memoir from prison. His manuscript is edited and annotated by a friend and fellow scientist. And throughout the story we get his interjections, all which seem so incredibly well-researched and real, that truly make the novel come to life. Perina travels to a Micronesian

island where he discovers a lost tribe that, through the eating of an indigenous turtle's flesh, are able to prolong their lives for three to six times the average human lifespan. Tales of his incredible discoveries and adoption of dozens of the islanders' children are strung throughout the narrative. It is written so expertly, with tension and release at the perfect moments, that you are never left bored. Even at almost 500 pages, I inhaled this book. Truly gripping until the very last sentence--and I mean the *very last one*.

That's all I will say because a huge treat of this book is discovering it for yourself. But good luck to Yanagihara who has to follow up two of the best books I've read in 2015--this and *A Little Life*--and possibly in my life. I truly can't wait to see what she does next. **4.5 stars**
