



The First Verse

Barry McCrea

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The First Verse: A Novel

The First Verse Details

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Isabelle says

This is a good novel, frightening in the real sense of the term inasmuch as the hero takes you along with him from sublimation, to obsession to insanity. All this in Dublin, with a strong literary backdrop; how much better can it get? My problem is that I filled in the blanks of the book with such zeal that I ended up thinking that the hero's two companions were avatars of himself created by his deranged mind. Not the case, from what I gathered from the McCrea's online interviews I read. So now, I am thinking I like my own version better. What a lark!

Stephanie says

This is about a young and closeted gay man - very young, I kept forgetting he was not even 20 as he often seemed older to me - who goes to university and meets some people who bring him into their book-based cult: they consult random books and random passages to answer questions about their lives and to divine the future. Great concept but I, like other reviewers, found the ending abrupt and tacked on - interesting but somehow unsatisfying.

Maria Clara says

4.5

ME HA ENCANTADO!!!!

Es el primer libro que leo que el protagonista es homosexual y me ha encantado pasearme por los bares gays de Dublin, por sus pubs y sus calles, vivir su vida 'prohibida', sucia (como el mismo la define), y a la vez sentir su amor obsesivo por Ian; así como su relación con Chris.... Ay, Chris, cómo he sufrido por él.

Pero esto sólo es la punta del iceberg. La aventura comienza con un juego inofensivo que se transforma en una locura, en la que nuestro protagonista se deslizará hasta caer en ella como si fuera un drogadicto.

No quiero decir nada más, salvo que si no le he dado las cinco estrellas por el final. En serio: ¿qué final es ese? ¿Cómo puede poner fin cuando yo tengo una infinidad de preguntas por hacer?

Jillian says

An intricately interesting read. I'm not really sure what I expected when I picked up this title, but it's been a few hours since I finished it and I'm still trying to digest it. The wandering adventures of Niall as he navigates of the book-related cult he finds himself sucked in to at times sucked me in greatly. At others, I sat staring at the page wondering where this was going, and why McCrea had written yet another scene in a pub. Overall however, a very gripping read and one I would recommend, though the ending had much to be desired.

And I might have tried a *sorte* myself. Just once or twice. >>

Chris says

Dublin youth Niall Lenihan is a college freshman, closeted and adjusting to the freedom of being away from home for the first time. After a series of mysterious incidents, Niall becomes intrigued with graduate student, Sarah (and attracted to her sidekick, John), after she introduces him to a fortune-telling method derived from reading the first verse of a randomly chosen page in a book. Niall's fascination turns into a dangerous obsession, where every decision he makes is controlled by these selected verses and his life revolves entirely around John and Sarah—who is more than just an eccentric intellectual.

Barry McCrea's novel is a quintessential page-turner. Bibliophiles will be especially taken with his selection of verses, and the theory of literature's manipulative ability.

Blake Fraina says

Niall Lenihan is entering his first year at Trinity Dublin, as one of two Beckett Scholars. He's somewhat young for his age - bookish and inexperienced; not yet out of the closet to anyone and still nursing an unrequited crush on Patrick, a popular, athletic, and decidedly straight, school chum. As Niall is settling into his rooms at university, a mysterious young man calls him by name from the courtyard below his window and serenades him with the first verse of a traditional song, "Oranges and Lemons, say the bells of Saint Clements." The stranger introduces himself as Pablo Virgomare and then promptly runs off. Thus begins Barry McCrea's brilliant and mysterious novel, *The First Verse*. Throughout the first chapter, Niall (and the reader) will notice a series small of incidents - coincidences - that seem to echo, or reflect, the first words of the rhyme. Most significant of these occurs when he briefly meets an eccentric older student, Sarah, who asks him to choose a passage at random from a book she is carrying and, to his shock, it is the very same line Pablo Virgomare recited to him but an hour earlier.

Soon Niall finds himself pursuing Sarah and her cohort John, in order to gain entree into a mysterious cult they belong to where the members base all their actions and/or decisions on randomly chosen passages from randomly chosen books. This allows them to live seemingly as if guided by the fates, without having to make any conscience choices of their own, without having to take responsibility for their actions. This lifestyle is very seductive to a timid young man who largely does what is expected of him and shies away from making bold, decisive moves (such as declaring his love for Patrick or coming out). At first they reject him but, by using their own methods against them, Niall chases them down and forces his way into their exclusive circle. Their nightly meetings are like supernatural seances that last until dawn, fueled by the ritual, repetitive chanting of book passages and the drinking of large quantities of Southern Comfort. As Niall's life begins to spin out of control, the book becomes a story of addiction and attempted recovery. Soon he is unable to make the simplest decision or, as with drugs or alcohol, to even feel normal without first consulting the books.

The First Verse can definitely be classified as literary fiction of the highest order, yet it's never difficult, dry or cumbersome to read. On the contrary, the writing is incredibly brisk and tight. The reader gets the impression that every passage, every word has been carefully chosen to fit into a larger, yet-to-be-revealed picture. Every quote, character name or book title mentioned offhandedly is not without a larger significance.

Yet beneath the artistry of the writing and the relevance of its themes, this is, first and foremost, a compulsively readable story. It's very much a mystery, a bit of a thriller and even includes a compelling little love story. Above all, it struck me as an intricately wrought puzzle, and not until the last piece was in place did it all make sense. Anyone who can relate to the idea of being seduced by the written word will love this book and the believable, flesh-and-blood protagonist at its heart will have the reader rooting for him until the very last page.

I firmly believe that, if Niall was straight, this book would have been a major bestseller. Personally, I recommend it to any lover of literature - straight or gay.

Gift says

Ein ziemlich komplexes, originelles, spannendes aber auch oft frustrierendes Buch!

Nach den ersten 150 Seiten war ich fest davon überzeugt, dass McCrea von „Killing your Darlings“ abgeschrieben hat. Dieser Verdacht hat sich nicht bestätigt. Bary hat bewiesen, dass er sich als Dozent an der Yale University in seinem Forschungsgebiet auskennt und verwickelte mich in seine obskure Welt voll von Büchern. Ich muss schon vorab sagen, dass ich diese Welt nicht mochte. Es war eine graue, kalte Welt, die Bücher zweckentfremdete und als eine Art der Sucht beschrieb. Gleichzeitig war es keine logische oder rein mystische Welt. Die Grenzen zwischen einer real klingelnden Fiktion und Sci-Fi/Mystery wurden verwischt. Dennoch war ich von der Handlung fasziniert. Die oft künstlich erzeugte Spannung irritierte mich, mit dem Hauptdarsteller konnte ich auch kaum Mitleid fühlen, aber... Aber es gab etwas, was mich fesselte und wollte nicht loslassen.

Allerdings, wie viele anderen war auch ich mit dem Schluss total unzufrieden. Bary, ist es dein Ernst?!! Vor diesem Hintergrund- nur drei Sterne. Es gibt bei Büchern kaum was Schlimmeres als ein versauter Schluss.

Lanea says

This is a pretty impressive first novel. It follows Niall, a young student from Sandycove, Dublin as he enters university at Trinity College Dublin to study French and English as a Beckett scholar. So, of course, I was going to read this no matter what. The book traces through one of my favorite cities, in the neighborhoods I used to haunt as a student, and the main character reminds me so much of one of my long-lost dear high school friends that reading the book was almost like a reunion. And then my long-lost friend found me last week, while I was nose-deep in this book.

Which is an interesting coincidence, because the plot of the book is all about the spooky power of books. Niall, a young gay man who is a genius of languages, steps into college life like many young gay men do. He starts to meet men he can date, relishes his freedom, and starts tip-toeing towards coming out. He makes his way as a scholar in his own right, set free from the constraints of his family and his former school mates. He befriends other students and tries to gauge how they'll react to his homosexuality, and on some level realizes that his own happiness is so much more important than anyone else's view of him. It's lovely.

And then it all goes to hell. It has to--something needs to drive the novel. Niall comes into contact with two

mysterious older scholars who are involved in a strange form of divination, sortes. He pesters all hell out of them until they let him into their mini-cult, and then loses himself to their rituals and their crackpot lifestyle. He also loses touch with his family, lets a promising new relationship fall by the wayside, insults his friends, and founders in school. So then we have to root for Niall to escape the cult.

The book isn't perfect, of course. It ends a bit abruptly. It tortures the reader a bit too much in spots--we want Niall to regain his senses, to remember how much he loves his friends and his studies, and how intrigued he was by the Dublin gay scene and one particular man. But despite the small weaknesses of the book, McCrea did something all too rare--he called attention to some of the complexities of being openly gay, even in post-Catholic Ireland, and he created a gay character who isn't just about stereotypes or erotica. His Niall is about so much more than his sex life. Because, well, isn't everyone? The book is a breath of fresh air, despite all of the claustrophobic chanting and studying the characters wallow in.

Steffi says

Nachdem ich gerade einen anderen kurzweiligen College-Roman, der sehr literaturlastig ist, gelesen habe, fällt dieser Roman nun besonders ab.

Ja, Dublin als Handlungsort ist spannend. Und eine moderne Geschichte, in der Schwulenclubs eine Rolle spielen, mal was anderes. Aber die Geschichte packt mich nicht. Dabei kann das an der mangelnden Kenntnis des Autors nicht liegen. Barry McCrea ist ein Literaturwissenschaftler, der zu interessanten Werken und Themen publiziert hat (Ulysses, Minderheitensprachen und ihr Einfluss auf die Literatur), aber hier wird dieses Wissen nicht wirklich lebendig vermittelt.

Vielleicht kriegt der Roman irgendwann mal wieder eine Chance, im Moment war's das. Daher erst einmal Abbruch.

Michelle Hall says

So, I found this book completely captivating.

Until the ending.

The end was a total and complete cop-out on the part of the author. It was like he was bored with continued writing, and slapped a "And they lived happy ever after, the end" ending on the plot. It was really rather sad, how he closed out the book. I was hooked in, the plot was moving along with incredible page-turning speed, and then it ended. Kaput. Just like that. *Way* before I thought the plot was ready to close.

I left it sadly disappointed. Shame.

Kim says

I don't know what this book was supposed to be about. A college student who has a mini mental breakdown? It's just pages and pages of a college student going out drinking with friends, following people who may or may not be real, and losing track of time. I kept waiting for something to happen, but nothing did. McCrea couldn't even keep the names of his characters straight, calling Paula's husband Frank in the beginning of the novel and then changing his name to Jim later. I read a short story by McCrea that was based on this novel

and I enjoyed it, but this book is kind of a mess. I can't believe he was able to get blurbs from Colm Toibin and Edmund White. I guess it pays to be an Ivy League faculty member.

Kerri says

Oh man I couldn't get into this. I just found it weird and the character is a jerk, which I'm sure is intended. the main character meets up with two other characters that ask questions and will conveniently find the answer by flipping to a random passage in any book. they meet up for a meeting where they flip and read through selected books and somehow connect with the world in a artsy way. I just gave up. Maybe I should have continued, and something exciting could have happened but I have no desire to find out.

Xabier Cid says

Every mystery novel about literature starts with 3 stars. The fourth comes because this is a quite interesting plot, light despite its topic, and quite fun. The amazing work of writing this patchwork of travel guides and Agatha Christie novels is also impressive.

However, there is not a fifth star. Plot goes mad towards the end, rather out-of-hand for the writer. It seems that characters had gained independence and autonomy, but their novel is more volatile and vague than the previous one written by McCrea.

I would try to read a new novel by this Irish writer.

Nick Sweeney says

Niall is a young Dublin student who has got a place on a scholarship to the prestigious Trinity College. He does the usual college things; he makes new friends, goes drinking, goes to parties, and even does a little bit of studying.

He is drawn out of college life firstly by his introduction into Dublin's gay scene. He has always been gay, as far as he knows, and has suffered unrequited love for a straight friend. The rough and ready Dublin scene heralds the awakening of him as a sexual being, and he enjoys it. Mostly.

However, the one thing that draws him out of both of these threads of his life is an archaic approach to its direction: the art of *sortes*, which means asking a question, choosing a book at random - any book, a novel, chick-lit or classic, a cookbook, a guide book, a maths textbook - and then opening it at random to find an answer that usually needs quite a bit of interpretation. He is initiated into the *sortes* rituals by the enigmatic Sarah, a mature Trinity student of about 30, and her younger friend John. Gradually, the *sortes* obsess them all as they try to get to the elusive 'next level' of an organisation known as *Pour Mieux Vivre* - 'A Better Life' - and take over their lives: John loses his job as a financial clerk and Niall's course rapidly goes down the pan, as does his involvement in the gay scene and his interest in putative boyfriend Chris. The rather obnoxious Sarah seems to be untouched by such calamities.

The Dublin portrayed by Barry McCrea is a vibrant, moving city that stands up well. It's not *Ulysses* (though a line or two from *Ulysses* has a prominent part in the book) but it's a great update. The second part of the book is set in Paris, where Niall seeks John and Sarah, at first, and then avoids them, and leads a strange and haunted nocturnal life. McCrea does justice to Paris, too.*

If this all sounds like utter nonsense, it kind of is, at times. There were a few passages that made me want to junk the book, but it's such an enjoyable read in its essence that I couldn't convince myself to put it down.

I read it partly because I saw it described as one of those books that owe something to Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, and I wasn't disappointed in this aspect of it: Niall is as self-absorbed and hapless as TSH's Richard Papan at times, as erudite, and as pitiable, but, just as often, as plausible.

*I guess I'm informed by having lived in both cities, though not for a long time.

Karina Vargas says

***Literati* : 2,5 estrellas.**

Niall Lenihan es un joven que vive con sus padres y su hermana en un pueblo de Dublin, Irlanda, y ahora que está recién graduado del instituto, debe mudarse a los dormitorios del Trinity College, donde ha recibido una beca para continuar con sus estudios. Esto significa para él un gran cambio, ya que se ve obligado a separarse de su mejor amigo, Patrick, que va a estudiar medicina, y también de Ian, el jugador de rugby popular de su clase, su amor platónico y secreto. Aún con todas sus penas amorosas rondando en su cabeza y el sufrimiento causado por no poder revelar su homosexualidad a sus seres queridos, Niall comienza a frecuentar a gente nueva: conoce a Fionnuala y ella luego le presenta a sus amigos; antes que pueda darse cuenta, su vida social lleva un buen ritmo y le va muy bien con las clases, aunque todavía le pesa no poder mostrarse tal cual es. Una noche, como tantas otras, concurre a una fiesta junto a Fionnuala y se queda dormido allí. Al despertar, la encuentra junto a Sarah y a John, a quienes había conocido previamente en circunstancias completamente distintas. Cuando ellos notan que él ha despertado, su amiga le invita a participar del juego que estaban haciendo, pero los otros dos se muestran un poco reticentes a ello. Finalmente, aceptan y así Niall conoce por primera vez a los *sortes*. Sin embargo, pronto comienzan a surgir más preguntas que respuestas, y eso que parecía ser sólo una distracción juvenil se transforma en un misterio, una adicción que no podrá abandonar y la pérdida del resto de sus días.

Este libro es confuso y raro.

El tema central sobre el que gira la trama son los *sortes*, sincronismos. Estos, básicamente, consisten en que se debe formular un pregunta en voz alta, dirigirse hacia una biblioteca con libros, tomar uno de ellos al azar (se supone que sentís un impulso) y elegir aleatoriamente, a dedo, una página, un pasaje de este; y esa, a veces más o menos metafórica, será la respuesta. La historia plantea que esta era una forma de predecir el futuro a la que acudían en la antigüedad los romanos y los griegos, usando las obras de Virgilio y la Biblia. Era una forma de comunicarse con seres superiores, con un mundo inmaterial, una especie de canal hacia lo inerte. Hasta aquí me resultó novedoso e incluso atractivo, porque aún me estoy aguantando las ganas de probarlo yo misma. Pero, resultó que las cosas no eran tan simples. Puedo llegar a entender que la idea de formular preguntas y hallar las respuestas en libros puede tornarse adictivo, no saber cuándo o cómo parar. No obstante, parece (y lo digo así, porque el autor no lo explica tampoco) que al leer cualquier libro de forma rápida, muchas veces, perdiendo la coherencia de su significado y al punto de memorizar versos o diálogos, se entraba en una especie de trance. Y cuando había más de una persona, cada una leía un pasaje determinado, rápido, sin tener sentido; después las lecturas se intercambiaban y se leían simultáneamente, sólo tomando conciencia del nuevo significado de cada palabra pronunciada por los distintos participantes. Esto generaba una suerte de éxtasis, y los lectores empezaban a tener alucinaciones, como oír melodías o ver estatuas que se movían. En otras palabras, se drogaban con los libros. Si esto no es lo suficientemente raro, resulta que atrás de todo hay algo parecido a una secta, y son los únicos que conocen el significado de esto.

No me molesta creer en lo irreal, pero al menos necesito una explicación, algo que lo sustente y Barry McCrea nunca lo hace. De hecho, desde el inicio hasta la última página quedan muchos cabos sueltos, que no voy a mencionar porque sino les contaría todo el libro. Hay escenas, diálogos o reacciones de los personajes que no tienen razón alguna. (view spoiler)

Nada se explica, nada.

Si tuviese que destacar algo positivo, sería la escritura. Es muy atrapante y no podés parar de leer. Creo que en un punto también se debe a que querés saber si finalmente alguien va a explicar algo de lo que sucede, pero no le quitamos mérito. Además, reconozco que el autor tiene un muy buen manejo del suspenso. Sólo algunos capítulos me parecieron aburridos, porque era una sesión de sincronismo tras otra, pero vuelve a retomar el ritmo pronto. Si bien cada tanto, en mi opinión, exageraba con las analogías o descripciones, en general la escritura es buena.

La historia está narrada en primera persona y en pasado, a cargo del protagonista principal, lo que nos da acceso a sus pensamientos y sentimientos más profundos. Creo que nunca conocí un personaje tan inseguro. Niall era exasperante, porque podía ser un pobre incomprendido, y tras eso actuaba como un imbécil. Por momentos se mostraba superado y atrevido, mintiendo y engañando a todos, y más tarde tenía lástima de sí mismo, corría en dirección contraria por lo que venía luchando, e incluso parecía sentir vergüenza de su homosexualidad. Hay muchos tramos dedicados a sus idas y vueltas amorosas, algunas más promiscuas que otras. Me molestaba un poco que se sienta excitado ante cada hombre que veía o saludaba; entiendo que sea gay, pero no es un animal que no pueda controlar sus instintos. Aunque bueno, eso puede ser subjetivo.

El final es abrupto, y para no perder el hilo de aquello que lo antecede, no tiene sentido, o al menos sigo intentando encontrarlo. Lo leí, busqué si había algún epílogo que arroje cierta claridad, releí las páginas anteriores... No, no sé qué pasó.

Literati es una novela cautivante, bien escrita, con una trama inicial interesante y con personajes misteriosos y contradictorios. Sin embargo, el sin sentido que acompaña al libro en toda su extensión, las escasas argumentos y la falta de un rumbo definido, la convierten en una lectura vertiginosa, que crea más preguntas que respuestas. Barry McCrea nos presenta un mundo en el que me hubiese gustado creer, pero me deja la sensación que ni él ha sabido creerlo o justificarlo.
