



Always

Nicola Griffith

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Aud Torvingen is back -- contemporary fiction's toughest, most emotionally complicated noir hero returns to teach a new round of lessons in hard-hitting justice, and to confront new adversaries: her own vulnerability and desire.

The steely shell of Nicola Griffith's seemingly indomitable protagonist Aud Torvingen appears to be cracking. The six-foot-tall fury (who proved in *The Blue Place* and *Stay* that she can kill you as easily as look at you) is shaken by the shocking consequences of the self-defense class she's been teaching, and her investigation of what seems to be run-of-the-mill real-estate fraud is turning out to be more than she bargained for.

Always brilliantly intertwines the dramatic episodes of Aud's class with the increasingly complicated investigation that introduces Aud to the limits of self-reliance, and to the scary and beautiful prospect of allowing oneself to depend on other people. What emerges is a thrilling, thoroughly engrossing novel that imbues Griffith's "classic noir hero" (*The New York Times Book Review*) with an emotional complexity that far exceeds the boundaries of the genre, and will push Griffith to her well-deserved place at the front rank of new-wave literary crime writers.

Always Details

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Author : Nicola Griffith

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Vickie says

"You're a sensualist, a hedonist of the first order," Kick tells Aud, right near the end of the book, and you know then that Kick has Aud's number. For all of her expediency, efficiency, and near-Terminator ability to assess and neutralize danger, Aud Torvingen is a creature as much a slave of her body as she is a master of it. Aud has herself convinced that she is fully in control, and a creature of intellect. She relies on and revels in her formidable deductive skills, and is even disappointed when antagonists and circumstances fall short of her expectations. Throughout this trilogy, however, Nicola Griffith has shown Aud to also be a woman who enjoys her body, through martial arts or eating delicious food or taking the body to the bar for a quick dusting off of the ol' cobwebs.

Always is the third book in a trilogy starring Aud Torvingen, an aloof, physically dangerous woman in Atlanta. What started in *The Blue Place* as a standard detective noir, complete with trouble spelled with a capital "T" walking into the office, evolved into one of the most sensual reading experiences I ever had, which continued on through the next book, *Stay*.

In *The Blue Place*, I became involved with Aud's mind: neatly detached, but able to conjure up the atmosphere of her surroundings. I never met a travel book as persuasive as Griffith's novel, almost convincing me to visit Norway despite my abhorrence to cold weather.

In *Stay*, I learned how Aud could use her methodical mind to break herself away from society, and, like a certain protagonist from Hemingway's "Big Two Hearted River", use the action of living a simplified, almost rustic life to separate herself from her pain. Despite her attempts to isolate herself, Aud is drawn back to society, and humanity. It's not in her nature to disengage, despite her aloof attitude, but to over-engage and think more into a situation than most people.

The double story line in *Always* serves the purpose of making the ending and beginning believable. The plots mirror each other, while at the same time providing an introduction and closure to each storyline. Despite throwing in this new device that gives us a stronger grasp of how history affects Aud's decisions, the plot is a little flat, lacking the dynamite of true tension to keep you emotionally engaged.

I feel as if *Always* is the book that Griffith had been waiting forever to write, and found the opportunity finally in her third book featuring Aud. The novel features quite prominently two subjects near and personal to her heart: multiple sclerosis and self-defense (though not together in a strange meld-y way ^_^). Her personal connection to these two aspects of the two main characters made research no doubt a snap, but it also stunted her plot. Make no mistake: these two subjects were actually the best written areas of the book, from the growing escalation of the self-defense classes to the foregone violent climax to the nearly opposite direction Aud must take to navigate Kick's situation. The rest of the book, however, to put it in a word, lacked. Perhaps the fact that Aud has money, and in Seattle, could toss it around willy-nilly, made the dramatic tension lessened, as opposed to the wilds of Norway. Real estate scams are kind of inherently boring, despite Aud's awesome sleuthing. Also, Aud cares about what happens to the movie set because she cares about Kick, but I feel that she, and the reader, are never really invested emotionally in the fate of the studio and the people in it. I might be missing something important, maybe some big moment for Aud where she starts to bury her apathy that borders on misanthropy, but if so, it was a such a subtle moment that most probably wouldn't get it.

That being said, I still liked the book. Kick was a good addition, a strong enough character to contend with a ghost. It is in Kick that Aud finds her mirror, and her match. A woman who knows her own body, and is at home within it and her surroundings. And like Aud, Kick has some issues that are sensitive enough that, when twinged, she lashes out in pain. And super kudos for using the word "Ware", as in "beware", broken down to its component parts. Griffith has a love of the English language that permeates her paragraphs and gives the words taste in my mouth as well as images in my head. I will continue to read anything she writes, and I also follow her blog, Ask Nicola.

On a final note, the cover art is very... interesting. Eschewing traditional ideas about how to fill in the space, the fist is coming at the reader, and it's pushed to the right of center. The bright purple cover color and bright green/yellow title suggest content more pulp-y than it contains. What I found most interesting is how it compares to the first two novels' covers. *The Blue Place* features a woman, presumably Aud, sitting quite comfortably sprawled, looking to the side. The image has the illusion of being much more wide than tall, narrowing our focus as well as suggesting that we are missing something important outside of the scene, especially as the image is cut off at strong angles. *Stay* has another interrupted image, this time of only the lower half of a woman's face, gradually disappearing as you move to the side. The fist on the cover of *Always*, however, is coming towards the foreground, as if to engage you. I can almost see a story within the images themselves. Thoughts?

shrug city says

I love Aud Torvingen so much. Here we have a butch, Norwegian private detective who gets to go about taking joy in the strength of her body and having tragic and complicated love affairs! Also, I want to date her. The best thing about the Aud Torvingen series is its mindfulness, expressed in a way that is almost antithetical to the modern treat-yourself conception but there all the same: Aud is intensely present in her body and in her perception of the world. Here we get to see some of the definitions of her philosophy in the segments where she teaches a self-defense class, which I really liked, even though (and perhaps because) it did take us out of the main plotline.

The main plotline, unfortunately, is just a little weaker and less emotionally resonant than the otherwise unrelated self-defense vignettes. There is some good stuff there: a little bit about Aud's ironclad perceptions getting challenged, a new love interest (caterer/stunt double is not a career combination I have ever conceived of, but it really hits the wish fulfillment category). Part of it is that Aud is not as grounded in Seattle as she was in Atlanta. She doesn't have a history there, or a support system, which strips back all her community and leaves only the 2000s equivalent of AirSpace, the sterile high-class hotels and fancy restaurants of the very wealthy. Another is that the plot is significantly lower-stakes for Aud: she's in it mostly to... clear off a film crew on one of her properties so she can, what, do something with it? She doesn't really care about the property. She doesn't really care about the crew. She does, after a while, begin to care about Kick, the aforementioned love interest, but there it's not a very emotionally resonant plotline for much of the novel.

However: any time spent with Aud is a good time. She's just a fantastic protagonist, which makes me excuse some of the wish-fulfillment excess of preternatural competence and fabulous wealth. Sometimes it's enough to just sink into my butch lesbian crimefighter fantasy and Griffith's beautiful prose.

Vanessa says

I was disappointed by the third and final book of the Aud series. The format of alternating between the main story taking place in Seattle and the self defense class in Atlanta just didn't work.

Seattle was the better of the two stories but was still plagued with the "I'm completely and totally devoted to a person I just met" that happened in the first book of the series.

The self defense class "story" didn't even feel like a story--more like a book on self defense (that may or may not be accurate). There were too many characters, especially since none of them were interesting and most were annoying. What happened at the end was fairly obvious from early on.

I'm not sure why Griffith changed the format for the last book...but it just didn't work. I'd give it a 2 out of 5 but that's only because I already knew the characters. As a stand-alone book, it'd only get one star.

James says

Whew! "Always" is a damn good story (clear and complete).

Ulf Kastner says

It seems that I can only muster a handful of random realizations and remarks pertaining to this third book built around the Aud Torvingen character (after The Blue Place and Stay):

Aud has psychopathic leanings. Why else would she ponder the ease with which she could maim or kill just about anybody she encounters by ways of going into nonchalant anatomical detail about such violence? Part of me gets this line of compulsive mind wandering of someone with a detached sense of physical superiority but another part of me thought 'what the hell?' when this sort of inner-voice violence Tourette's surfaces in the company of people she's emotionally vested in.

Now that Aud is independently wealthy I'm suddenly struck by the parallels between her and Pippi Longstocking. No cash-flow worries - check. Invincibly strong - check. A parent that lives as a political leader across an ocean - check. Sleeps with her feet on the pillow in case a burglar enters her bedroom so she can overwhelm them with the benefit of the element of surprise that brings - alright, so Aud Torvingen wouldn't exactly subscribe to that, but the gist of Pippi's thinking reeks of what Aud would approve of (foresight, preparation, improving of odds in a potential confrontation.)

I must not be a fan of two storylines told in alternating chapters. I kinda struggled with my motivation to continue reading the less favorite of the two stories comprising Hardboiled Wonderland and the End of the World and now with Always I was dreading the storyline flashing back to Aud giving a self-defense class to a group of Southern women in Atlanta because for me personally it didn't flow nearly as well as the storyline of her flying out to Seattle with her friend Dornan to investigate peculiar circumstances involving a warehouse property she inherited from her dad (that's part of the independent wealth bit I touched upon

earlier.)

The hardcover edition of *Always* has one of the most hideous book covers I've encountered in quite some time (that is, in a book I was actually interested in reading.) My apologies to Nellys Li, the Penguin Group designer responsible for this...inexplicable design. I sincerely hope it didn't take longer than an hour to lay out and I'm saddened that Riverhead Books didn't treat Griffith to more attractive options (apparently there were LESS attractive options, as difficult as I find that to fathom.)

In closing I'm left hoping that Nicola Griffith puts the Aud Torvingen stories on hold to write something more exciting. I guess I understand the attraction to a character developed over several books, but in good Aud Torvingen fashion I'd prescribe honing some other skills, stretch a different set of muscles. It's too easy and inviting to grow complacent with what's familiar and safe.

Cherie In the Dooryard says

What a sad way to end this series. Not that the end was sad, but that this slow, broken-up, meandering story really brought down what had been taut, compelling reads. I sometimes dreaded the violence of Aud, but it turns out that Aud without violence is...kinda boring and whiny.

Karen says

Guilty pleasure that's not really that guilty. Like the others, progressive, mindful, sensual, and tiny bit wicked. Only misses the 5 stars by being just a touch too over-the-top. The utopia Aud promises to set up at the end of the book is in fact a utopia I would invest in, but I just can't believe it will all be true, even in that fictional version of the world where women like Aud and Kick exist. Great sex scenes. Great love scenes. Real friendship. The question: What does it mean to live with integrity? With grace? The fantasies of beauty, power, money, and violence refracted through a lens I can relate to. In chapter 10 Griffith writes about an ancient chair and identity with reverence, wisdom, and a faltering at the end that almost makes Aud into a real human. Bonus points for being set in Seattle. Thanks to my ladies at The Mystery Bookshop on 117 Cherry Street! You rock my socks off!

Grace Fisher says

Aud Torvingen is the lesbian power fantasy I never knew I wanted. Strong and silent, tall and square-jawed, she's got money, sick martial arts skills, and a fast mind. She gets involved in interesting cases, inevitably tangles with a gorgeous woman with some sort of Trouble in her life, and kicks a lot of ass.

Griffith's writing is enjoyable - great use of short, punchy sentences. Conveys smell and feel of a place really well, whether it's Atlanta, Seattle, or Norway.

Basically if you want mystery/thriller that's not yet again about boring ex-military men with stubbly lantern jaws, please read this series. They're probably best in order, but I read them 2-3-1 and was only a bit confused.

Kennedy says

This book series does not resemble many others I have read. Always makes you think about what you are doing with your life. For example, are you valuing each day and using hours each day to make a difference not just for yourself but for those around you and even the world. The thought that there is always someone or something better either makes you settle or push harder. Stories that make you think as well as entertain is a good thing to me.

Melody says

11/2012. This time, I paid more attention to the self-defense chapters. Maybe some of it will stick. I enjoyed the Seattle setting a lot, since I've now been to Seattle enough that I recognized many of the places. Mostly, though, I just love Aud.

6/2009. I'm more than half in love with Aud Torvingen. In this, Griffith's third book about her, she's a bit more human. Almost fallible. Clueless when it comes to one particular woman. The plotting is taut, the dual storyline engaging, and the characters very strong. A gripping, well-written and ultimately hopeful book.

Alena says

Oh my, I think that's the best book in the series yet.

It's another emotional read with fantastic prose. The structure of the book works well, it changes between chapters that continue Aud's story, I'd say about 6 months after Stay ends, and chapters that have Aud teach self-defense to a group of women. While the one story arch follows Aud on taking further steps on the ladder out of grief, grief that was so central in Stay, the self-defense arch really gives another insight into Aud's philosophy of life, a philosophy that seems to be challenged in the other story-line. While a strong teacher in class (this storyline is set in the future), Aud in this novel really struggles with herself.

After the emotional turmoil in Stay, where the grief for Julia encompassed me as well, Always shows a new phase for Aud. She continues her friendship with Dornan, which is beautiful to read. She's really more like a child at times in her insecurity in how to deal with other people. Opening up to Dornan, I think, also allows her to be more open with others, for example her mother who we get to meet. At the core of the novel, however, is Aud opening up to another woman. It's both beautiful and painful to read. There are moments of jealousy, which seems to be a new experience, that are written so convincingly that I wanted to slap Dornan myself. And other than with Julia, there's a lot of negotiation going on between Aud and Kick, they both make mistakes and try to fumble their way through life and this relationship. That the whole thing ends on a positive note was very rewarding at 4 am this morning.

jo says

april 2015. i finished this. re-read it from scratch with new eyes. i am no longer willing or inclined to pronounce on the motives that lie behind the creation of this book. in fact, i feel pretty lousy (presumptuous, for one) for having done so in the first place. i have also discovered that NG has MS, which would have been easily findable had i finished the book in the first place, since it is in the afterword. many of the other things i wrote in my OR i also find now wrong, though not cussedly wrong; just wrong readings of the book. aud is not mellower here. she's as taut and rageful as she is in the previous books of this series. in fact, murder fantasies pretty much dominate this book. 1-5 below are all wrong. i *don't like* how 3. plays out, but i don't find it to be a propelling force in the novel at all. what didn't work for me this second time around were: a) the way the atlanta plot wraps up (it's signaled pretty early on and this signaling doesn't disappoint; why not surprise us nicola?) and (and here i stick with OR) b) all that damn throwing around of cash. just like the first time around, so boring.

original 12/09 review below

man, one star. i love this writer. i love her previous aud torvingen books.

this is what happened here. griffith's torvingen mysteries are a taut affair. they are taut because the character is taut. she's a bundle of nerves, a firecracker (or something bigger) always ready to explode, a knot of rage. in the first novel of this three-book series she got mellower at some point, and that was okay, too. but i guess griffith wasn't too comfortable with that, because she killed the cause of her mellowness pretty fast.

is this novel an attempt to give us a more mellow aud? maybe. i am trying to get into the mind of nicola griffith at the time when she set out to write this book and this is what i think she told herself:

1. i want to write a longer book
2. i want to write a book with two entwined plots
3. i want to make dornan and aud compete for the same woman
4. i want less violence
5. i want aud to heal

i think 1. and 4., if that's indeed what NG told herself, were mistakes. tautness and violence are too much part of aud's persona.

but the most damning thing, as far as the novel is concerned, is that both plot lines are really weak, and compounding them strengthens neither of them, it just makes the book a long pointless slog.

and that depresses me. so i'm abandoning this long mystery some 100 pages to the end, and i don't feel at all bad about it. (oh, and the throwing around of large wads of cash gets pretty boring after a while.)

Kimberly says

The main character is interesting and I enjoy the detail of some of her observations. She is also arrogant and condescending.

This book's storyline is told in alternating chapters which are set in different times and places. It reads like

two separate books that were squashed into one without benefit of a common narrative. I found myself skipping the Atlanta section and only reading the Seattle portion of the story.

Elizabeth says

Too much detail getting in the way between plot and Aud's latest lady. AND I was not wild about the self-defense class chapters.

I still have a crush on Aud though.

Duh.

Rob says

...With *Always* Griffith once again delivers a fascinating novel. It is an impressive bit of character development. The author pulls no punches when it comes to making her main character suffer. The crime element in the novel is not quite as present as in the first two volumes. If you approach this as a whodunit, the novel will probably not satisfy you. Personally I was much more interested in seeing if Aud would manage to find some stability in her life and heal some of the scars that are so prominently present in her story, and in that respect the novel absolutely delivers. If you enjoyed Griffith's science fiction and are not afraid to try a different genre don't hesitate to pick these up.

Full Random Comments review
