



A Pretty Mouth

Molly Tanzer

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Re-Animator meets The Secret History in this Tale of Sex and Science

Henry Milliner thinks his days of being the school pariah are over forever when he attracts the attention of Wadham College's coolest Fellow Commoner, St John Clement, the Lord Calipash. St John is everything Henry isn't: Brilliant, graceful, rich, universally respected. And as if that wasn't enough, St John is also the leader of the Blithe Company, the clique of Natural Philosophy majors who rule Wadham with style. But when being St John's protege ends up becoming a weirder experience than Henry anticipated -- and the Blithe Company doesn't quite turn out to be the decadent, debauched crew he dreamed of -- Henry has some big decisions to make. Should he beg the forgiveness of his only friend, naive underclassman John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester, or should he ride it out with St John and try to come out on top?

Tangling with a Calipash is an invariably risky endeavor. From antiquity to the modern era, few who have encountered members of that family have benefited from the acquaintance. If only Henry knew the that Calipashes are notorious for their history of sinister schemes, lewd larks, and eldritch experiments, he would realize there are way worse things than being unpopular...

A Pretty Mouth Details

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Author : Molly Tanzer

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From Reader Review A Pretty Mouth for online ebook

Ahimsa says

If the glowing reviews from authors like Baron, Kiernan, Pugmire, Langan, etc don't convince you to pick up this book, then perhaps nothing in the multiverse could. But what a shame that would be! The stories in this collection are a lot of fun, clearly well-researched (though I did find the language too modern at times), and could have only come from a rather twisted mind. In tone and characters, it reminded me a lot of that fantastic storytelling game Gloom. Would be a lot of fun to play that game with a Calipash expansion. I would have loved to see horror of a more cosmic bent infuse some of these stories, but as it was the Stuart Gordon level squick worked perfectly.

David Harris says

I read this book after it was mentioned in a round up by Damien Walter in The Guardian. It was enjoyable, though I think that Ms Tanzer will write better, and to a British reader there were a number of howlers where very un-British phrases were placed in the mouths of English characters.

The book consists of four short stories and a novella ("A Pretty Mouth"). These are based around the mythology of the aristocratic Calipash family of Devon, different stories being set from the Roman occupation to the 1920s (they go backwards in time) although the dating of some is vague.

The Calipashes are a cursed family, their affliction having distinctly Lovecraftian overtones (though mainly of the Innsmouth, children-with-webbed-feet variety rather than the unspeakable-horrors-from another dimension sort). This allows the author to spin a variety of spooky Gothic stories told in different forms, loosely suited to the different times they're set in.

The first story, "A Spotted Trouble at Dolor-on-the-Downs" is a PG Wodehouse pastiche, narrated by Jeeves, Bertie Wooster's gentleman's gentleman, who has to investigate some fishy goings on at a seaside resort. I take my hat off to Tanzer's ambition here. Mimicking Wodehouse's style - or even his ambience - would be a tall order for any writer, and while the story is fun, I don't think that she quite hits the mark with this. There's also, perhaps, a slight cultural unfamiliarity which shows up: for example the English seaside town was at its peak in the 20s and 30s and Dolor-on-the-Downs would not have been "seedy" (in any case, Aunt Agatha would not have visited anywhere that could have been so described).

The second, "The Hour of the Tortoise" is much more successful - set in the late 19th century, it's basically a Gothic tale of a young girl returning to her childhood home, Calipash Manor, to find her guardian dying, and something distinctly rum going on. There's a twist in that the young lady is a writer of literary smut, and another in the ending of the story. Again, though, Tanzer misses one or two points of etiquette - the servants wouldn't have addressed Chelene by her first name, she would be "Miss Chelene". The phrase "visit with" is also out of place

The third, "The Infernal History of the Ivybridge Twins", set in the very early 19th century, is perhaps written in the vein of MR James, though like most of the others in the volume it is rather more saucy than he would have liked. It manages to both chill and amuse.

The novella, "A Pretty Mouth", takes place around the time of the Restoration and is set in an Oxford college (Wadham). It has something of a Hell-fire club ambience, recounting the doings of a particularly debauched member of the Calipash family who befriends a young man, Henry Milliner, with unfortunate consequences for the latter.

The final story, "Damnatio Memoriae" is almost an origin story for the Calipashes, based on a Roman expedition to Britannia. Alone in this volume, it has (almost) no supernatural aspect.

The stories are all satisfactorily creepy, the effect being heightened by one's growing knowledge, through the book, of the Calipashes and what they're capable of. Tanzer has clearly given some thought to creating an overall story arc. Given the family's history of dealings with the unspeakable over many centuries, it would have been tempting to set them up by the end as potent villains, to the detriment of the story but she avoids that by hinting at and then describing various failings and twists of chance that limit them.

Where I felt the stories fell down slightly was in some of the language. For example, "A Pretty Mouth", set at Oxford in 1660, was full of what read to me as modern US college slang including references to "grades" and terms like "whatever!" and "awkward!" and a discussion in one place of the effect of "social class" (I think this anachronistic and natives of 17th century England would have been more likely to use a term like "station".) I may be being over sensitive here. After all, the story is written in Modern, not Jacobean, English, so why not go the whole way and use up to date terms? And as Tanzer is (I'm pretty sure) an American writer, it's clearly no more wrong to use Modern American English here than Modern English English (as it were). Nevertheless this grated on me in places (though the story is good enough to carry it) and I wondered how far it was deliberate - in some places she has used 17th century terms (such as referring to the "middling sort" when describing Henry's background)

So I'm giving this three rather than four stars. But all the same I hope she writes more soon, because hers is a distinctive voice and I think she's found - or created - a richly unsettling vein of horror to exploit.

Lori says

From publisher

Read 10/16/12 - 10/20/12

4 Stars - Strongly Recommended to readers who enjoy sick twists on classic lit

Kindle Book

Publisher: Lazy Fascist Press

Lazy Fascist Press brings it again. And this should not come as a surprise to anyone. They've brought it before and will continue to bring it, forever and ever, amen. I've reviewed enough of their quirky, accessibly bizarre fiction to know that whatever they put out, I'm going to want - no, need - to get my greedy little hands on it.

This time I was wowed and cowed by Molly Tanzer's A Pretty Mouth. In this collection of interconnected stories, we are forced to bear witness to the dark and twisted history of the high-class Calipash family. Black magic and treachery abound in these creatively manipulative tales. Beginning at the end and working their way backwards through time, each story introduces us to a new generation of Lord Calipash's and slowly pieces together the curse that has dogged their bloodline for generations.

Let me start by saying that the more you know about the literature for each time period Molly visits, the more fun you'll find yourself having and the more sting her satire will carry. For example, the opening story, "Dolor-on-the-Downs", pairs its current (and financially floundering) Lord Calipash with, of all people, Bertie Wooster and his valet Jeeves. Now, promise you won't laugh when I confess that I had no clue this was a sick twist on the ACTUAL Wodehouse stories. How could I possibly know that when I'd never read one before? I just assumed Molly was poking fun at it by naming the valet after the famous savant manservant. But as I read on, and confessed my confusion to @booksexyreview, the story began to come into sharper focus and I quickly caught a whiff of what Molly was cooking up. And once I knew it was the actual Wodehouse men, the story took on a whole different meaning for me!

So we've got Jeeves helping our twenty-seventh Lord Calipash to solve the perplexing problem of the strange sea creature that lives in the bowels of the hotel in which they are relaxing. Then we've got the Bronte-like "The Hour of the Tortoise", a creepy Gothic Victorian tale of a young lady called back to the residence of a dying Calipash, who finds herself in possession of a strange trinket that binds her to the family mausoleum in the most unexpected way. A school aged Calipash and his band of bad-ass buddies appear in the title story, in which mad-scientist experiments and bawdy displays of power determine the fate of their hopeful classmate Henry. And the final story finds us knee-deep in Roman times where it all begins with the earliest Calipash, who has been shipwrecked on an island populated with strange barbarians, becoming the unfortunate recipient of this unshakable curse.

If you think *A Pretty Mouth* sounds like a lot of fun, it is. Molly's got a style unlike any other's. It's one that doesn't take itself too seriously while at the same time impressing upon the reader not to take it too lightly. Beware the enemy, even when it turns out to be you.

This goodreads review, by SP Miskowski, sums the collection up better than I could ever hope.

Many thanks to Lazy Fascist Press for constantly feeding my addiction for challenging indie fiction. Keep fighting the good fight and putting kick-ass literature out in front of our faces.

S.P. says

My first encounter with Molly Tanzer's delightful fiction occurred at the 2011 World Horror Convention, where Tanzer read an excerpt from "The Infernal History of the Ivybridge Twins." This cleverly cockeyed story of inappropriate devotion between 18th century aristocratic siblings first appeared in the Innsmouth Free Press anthology Historical Lovecraft. It was soon reprinted in *The Book of Cthulhu* (Night Shade Books). Around the same time Cameron Pierce at Lazy Fascist Press invited Tanzer to turn the growing history of one peculiar family into a book. The result is *A Pretty Mouth*, and I haven't had this much pure, crazy fun reading a work of fiction in a long time.

For anyone looking for a good read, this is it. Tanzer knows how to tell a tale. The pacing is expert and the characters are immediately engaging. *A Pretty Mouth* is definitely a page-turner. Yet each period Tanzer recreates is specific and wildly vivid. Nothing is tossed off. The underlying foundation for the book is a solid grasp of history, language, and philosophy. So the more you know of British history and the more classics you have read, the more fun you will have.

The book is comprised of four short stories and a novella. Each tale is set in a different era and may be read and enjoyed separately. Together they form a substantial arc, revealing hundreds of years of strange (often

supernaturally strange) behavior among the highborn Calipashes. The mysterious origin of the family curse is withheld until the last story, creating dramatic suspense while the author traces several generations in reverse chronological order.

“A Spotted Trouble at Dolor-on-the-Downs” takes place in Edwardian England at the Marine Vivarium, a resort hotel catering to the whims of the aristocracy. There Alastair Fitzroy, the twenty-seventh Lord Calipash, frets over the impending demise of his family’s estate and wonders how to get his sister to stop languishing all day in her bath. The Lord Calipash is at a loss until he bumps into his old school chum Bertie Wooster. It seems Bertie’s valet Jeeves is a wizard at solving problems.

The audacity of introducing these characters to assist in a Wodehouse-worthy situation is matched perfectly by Tanzer’s facility with prose style. The entire story is recounted by Jeeves as an entry in the Club Book of the Junior Ganymede Club for Gentlemen’s Personal Gentlemen. The language and historical references could pass for original Wodehouse, if not for the aquatic creature in a tank in the basement, and the amphibious inclinations of Lady Alethea in the bathtub. The conclusion is both fitting and hilarious.

“The Hour of the Tortoise” takes us on a Victorian Gothic journey. If the author has missed a theme from that privately kinky, publicly repressed era I don’t know what it might be. Our heroine Chelone travels by train to her former home in the country, to visit her dying patron, a crusty old man to whom she may or may not be related by blood. Chelone was banished from the estate years ago and eventually earned her meager living by writing tales of erotic intrigue for a popular though disreputable magazine. Throughout the story Chelone weaves her Gothic fiction until the fate of our heroine and hers become inextricably entwined.

This darkly romantic story is worthy of a Bronte, except for the naughty bits written by our heroine for her demanding editor. The naughty bits are hugely entertaining, by the way. The language, setting, and characterization are flawless; all contribute to a keen portrait of an intellectual woman undone by patriarchal power. The madwoman in the attic has nothing on our fair Chelone.

In “The Infernal History of the Ivybridge Twins,” Tanzer ranges over the ideas and influences shaping society during the Seven Years’ War. In Devonshire the ancestral home of the Lords Calipash sprawls across the countryside, dominating the landscape while reflecting a mania for architectural and garden design. Nothing is too ornate or superfluous to be considered worthwhile. The style of Tanzer’s prose in this section would please Henry Fielding, and readers are frequently reminded that the shocking events presented are intended purely as an example of unacceptable behavior. In other words, it is a romp and it is delicious fun.

For the novella “A Pretty Mouth” and the short story “Damnatio Memoriae” the author mixes anachronistic language with historically accurate detail and strikes a perfect balance. “A Pretty Mouth” takes place at Wadham College, Oxford in the 17th century. The boys who attend the prestigious institution are typical of their age and degree of privilege. Their nefarious adventures will strike a chord with readers fond of stories about school days. But this magical tale is a far cry from the idealized world of Harry Potter and his little chums. These boys woo and taunt and brutalize one another. Their secret experiments are matters of life and death—and sex. In a stunning reversal we catch a glimpse of the vast gulf between genders in an era when girls were expected to sew and sing while boys studied Greek and Latin and grew up to rule the world.

Finally, “Damnatio Memoriae” takes us to the shores of Britannia circa 40 A.D., where our hero Petronius stumbles through an unwanted trek led by a female barbarian. Along the way we meet the ideal Roman soldier, who turns out to be an ancestor to all of the Lords Calipash we have encountered in the previous stories. To find out where that trek leads and how the dashing and courageous Roman acquires the family curse, you will have to read the book. Lucky you!

For reviewing purposes I requested and received an advance reading copy of *A Pretty Mouth* from the publisher, Lazy Fascist Press.

Caleb Wilson says

Sweetly nasty historical horror. My favorite story of the collection was the title novella, set in a tawdry yet charming just-prior-to-Restoration England full of wigs and evil twins and science of dubious morality. I could practically hear the Michael Nyman music blasting as I read it.

Orrin Grey says

So, I've been waiting (im)patiently to read this pretty much ever since I first read "The Infernal History of the Ivybridge Twins" in draft form before it appeared in *Historical Lovecraft*. It was, and remains, one of my favorite stories I've read in, well, basically ever, and now Molly (who, full disclosure, is a good friend) has expanded the concept into an equally fantastic book.

Part novel, part short story collection, part genealogy of the debased Calipash family, the writing shifts gears seamlessly from Wodehouse pastiche to sword-and-sandal epic, without ever losing the unmistakable voice of the author.

More, and more cogent, things later, I hope! For now: This is brilliant!

Bryce says

A pastiche of Wodehouse comedy-of-manners and Lovecraftian horror, Tanzer gives us a grand collection of short stories and one longer novella.

The titular novel focuses on Henry Milliner, a British schoolboy who would do anything to get in with the right upper-crust crowd. But he doesn't realize how extreme "anything" can really be. Personally, I hated piggy, bootlicking Henry and was mightily pleased at his comeuppance in this story.

This would be a tough read for anyone unfamiliar with Wodehouse or with Lovecraft's mythology, but a lot of fun for those with the proper background.

The cover of the book is gruesome enough to make it fun to take on the subway.

Justin Steele says

Easily one of the most entertaining books I've ever had the pleasure of reading. Like most weird fiction authors, Molly Tanzer first caught my attention with her short fiction. I read her original tale of the debauched Calipash family and quite frankly, I was an instant fan. *A Pretty Mouth* is Tanzer's first collection, and what a first collection it is.

A Pretty Mouth is a reverse, incomplete history of the Calipash family. Within its pages are four short stories (two of which have been previously published elsewhere) and a long novella. Every story present can easily stand alone, but when strung together they paint a twisted picture of the Calipashes over the centuries.

A quick look at the stories:

The collection opens with an original, *A Spotted Trouble At Dolor-On-The-Downs*, in which Tanzer takes the character of Reginald Jeeves (the butler/manservant created by author P.H. Wodehouse) and places him in the middle of a sticky conundrum. While vacationing at Dolor-On-The-Downs, a seaside resort, Jeeves's employer Wooster comes into contact with an old school mate, Alastair Fitzroy, the twenty-seventh Lord Calipash. What follows is an unfortunate turn of events in which Jeeves is forced into the service of Fitzroy. The story, like every story in the collection, is a weird tale through and through, but tinged with enough hilarity to really make it something special.

Tanzer follows with *The Hour of The Tortoise* (originally appearing in *The Book of Cthulhu II*). Whereas the first story takes place in the early 20th century, *The Hour of the Tortoise* rewinds the clock to the 19th century and follows Chelone Burchell, a pornography writer and cousin to the Calipash family, as she returns to the estate after many years in a sort of exile. This story was a standout in the anthology that it first appeared, and Tanzer does a brilliant job of blending humor, sexuality, and creepiness so that the final result is a smooth read with an entertainment factor that's through the roof. This one still remains one of my favorite stories of this debauched family.

Next comes the story that started it all, *The Infernal History of the Ivybridge Twins*. This one takes readers back to the 18th century, and features what will become common elements to every Calipash story: nods to Lovecraft, twins, hilariously perverse sexuality, debauchery, plenty of the macabre, and, of course, gut-busting dark hilarity. This was, appropriately, my first Tanzer story, and the one that started this whole wicked history. The plot is just like the title implies, and details the history of a wicked set of twins.

A Pretty Mouth, the title novella, is perhaps the best piece in the collection. And saying that is difficult, because every story was brilliant. In this one Tanzer gives reader a view into 17th century school life at Wadham College in Oxford. This tale follows Henry Milliner, a young man who would do anything to get in with St. John Clement, the Lord Calipash and the most popular student at Wadham. The boy finally finds an "in" but finds out that being a member of the Blithe Company might not be all it's cracked up to be. The story is filled with plenty of twists and turns, and shows that Tanzer is comfortable working in the realm of longer fiction.

And finally, the collection finished with *Damnatio Memoriae*, which takes readers all the way back to ancient Rome. An expedition to barbaric Britannia goes awry, and readers are introduced to the first of the Calipash line to set foot on the British Isles.

With this collection, Molly Tanzer has become one of my favorite new authors. Her love of Victorian literature is present, and combined with some modern elements the result is something quite special. The

humor is spot-on in every story, and balanced so well with the macabre elements that it brings to mind a perverse hybrid of HP Lovecraft and Edward Gorey.

I really can't recommend this collection enough. It's hard to remember the last time I had this much fun reading a book, and was actually sad for it to come to an end. Readers looking for a wild frolic through a twisted, bizarre, depraved, nefarious, ingenious and unabashedly perverted mind should look no further, this is the book they've been waiting for.

Originally appeared on my blog, The Arkham Digest.

Lisa Reads & Reviews says

[the soul of one person could be exchanged with the body of another? (hide spoiler)]

Brett Talley says

A Pretty Mouth is one of those books I had heard a lot about well before I ever decided to purchase it. Molly Tanzer has an obvious talent for the weird and eldritch, and the praise that preceded her and her book was not to disappoint. APM is not exactly what I expected, however. It is not a novel, but rather a sort of connected short story collection, centering around a central novella, all focused on the family history of the house Calipash, told in reverse chronological order. If that sounds confusing, it can be. But if you stick with it, everything becomes clear and you will find yourself with a powerful desire to reread the book from the beginning, lest you not know what you've missed.

A definite recommendation for anyone who likes there horror on the weird and Lovecraftian side.

Jesse Bullington says

I think Molly should update her goodreads bio! She's a good friend, but that's actually made me more guarded in my praise, lest it appear as biased...but the fact is the book rocks. Here's what I posted on Amazon:

stunningly original debut is unlike any tome you've ever encountered. Part reverse genealogy, part novel, part collection, part pastiche, it manages to be wholly original, by turns decadent, hilarious, erotic, and sinister. Imagine John Hughes directing an adaptation of a Gothic novel starring a young Rob Lowe opposite a younger Jeffrey Combs, or Lovecraft and Robert E. Howard cutting loose and collaborating on a picaresque, or Black Adder as envisioned by Roald Dahl, Angela Carter, Edward Gorey, and P.G. Wodehouse on an absinthe-bender, and you're only scratching the surface of the weirdest, most audacious work to come down the pike in many a strange aeon. For fans of historical fiction, Victorian pornography, Mythos horror, Tom Jones, sword-and-sandal epics, Jeeves and Wooster, the poetry of John Wilmot, and boys' school romps, *this* is the book you've been waiting for!

Alan Clark says

When I was a boy, I lived on a piece of property that had a woods along a creek. Because that part of the property was across the street from my house, folks, probably teenagers, perhaps didn't think it belonged to anyone and they'd hide stuff there like liquor and girlie magazines. I wasn't interested in the liquor at the time, but when I found a Playboy or Penthouse, it was an exciting gift. At the same time, I was a bit uncomfortable going through the mildewed, bug ridden mags, peeling the warped pages apart carefully so they didn't tear. Though exciting, there was something disturbing about the process. *A PRETTY MOUTH* is a book of sensual prose, telling dark, sexy stories. Yes, a mix of sex and horror. Not so much violence, but the creepy edge of horror. Like the girlie mags from the woods along the creek, there's something exciting about the discovery as well as something deliciously disturbing about it. I recommend it highly.

Autumn Christian says

Molly Tanzer has created a unique and fantastical Victorian world - a place where demons aren't always vanquished and sometimes the greedy and corrupt come out on top. All of the stories in *A Pretty Mouth* are related to the indomitable Calipash family and their legacy. She writes in a crisp, easy style that reads like a breath of fresh air, quite in contrast with the astute high-society with all its airs and customs that she portrays. I devoured these stories easily - they're all a little strange, a little sexy, and offer but a window into the fascinating realm that she's created, leaving me to think that she's created a vast world for us to later explore.

Dan Schwent says

A Pretty Mouth contains the tales of multiple generations of the Calapash family.

My first exposure to Molly Tanzer was *Vermilion*. When I learned Colleen Danzig from *I Am Providence* was based on her, I figured I was due to give her another look.

A Pretty Mouth is really fucked up but in the best possible ways. I was hooked from the opening story. Speaking of which, Bertie Wooster loses a bet and Jeeves has to help one of Bertie's friends, Lord Calapash, with his bathtub-bound sister, who is addicted to the secretions of a bizarre octopus. From there, the weirdness train rolls backwards, exploring the various members of the Calapash clan throughout history, all the way back to the beginning of the line in ancient Rome.

Each story is written in a different style, from the Wodehousian language of the first story, to Bronte, on down the line. The stories all have a Lovecraftian undercurrent, with the Calapash's being known for their look, not unlike the Innsmouth look. There's sex, incest, twincest, murder, sorcery, Lovecraftian horror and lots of crazy ass shit.

The homages to various Lovecraft tales were well done and didn't feel like Lovecraft pastiches alone. Molly Tanzer put her personal touch on each tale, writing in a variety of styles, bringing a freshness to the Lovecraftian subgenre.

A Pretty Mouth hit the sweet spot for me. About the only negative thing I can say about it is that I wish it was twice as long. Four out of five stars.

K.J. Charles says

Eh. Collections of shorts and a novella about the sicko Calipash family, sort of comedy Lovecraft in tone. The first stories are enjoyably weird and warped, but the novella's balance between nasty and entertaining tipped too far the nasty way for my current reading pleasure.
