



Some things you can't learn at school

PATRICK GALE

Friendly Fire

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Youthful beauty, intellectual brilliance, physical passion, tragedy, and disgrace are all in this wonderful novel, as told through the eyes of a 14-year-old girl.

Sophie is a self-contained, exceptionally bright child who has no known parents and has spent all of her life in a children's home. Her life is transformed when she wins a scholarship to Tatham's, a kind of Oxbridge university for teenagers.

But this is only the start of an education as much emotional as intellectual. Sophie falls hopelessly in love with Lucas, adored gay son of a wealthy Jewish family and, through him, is drawn into a tangle of betrayed friendship and forbidden passions that ends in tragedy and disgrace.

Spanning the years 1975 to 1979, the chapters alternate between school terms and holidays, between Sophie's dogged pursuit of the glittering prizes and her slow, painful discovery of who she is and where she belongs. Through other people's families, and especially other people's mothers, she learns as much about the mysterious laws of class and love as she learns from her teachers about the Latin and Greek that will prove her passport to security.

Friendly Fire Details

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Hannah Wingfield says

My friend Fanny, who is a huge Patrick Gale fan (and who I interviewed here) gave me a copy of this several birthdays ago but for some reason I never got around to reading it until now, despite thinking that it sounded excellent from the synopsis. I think it was one of those cases of “saving” a book indefinitely and not wanting to be without the option of picking up something that I knew was a good read. Anyway, I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: I need to read more books by Patrick Gale. He is excellent, and if his books were people they would be witty, slightly neurotic and rather creative introverts, with whom I would like to be friends.

... [Read the rest of my review here: <https://whathannahread.wordpress.com/...>]

Luke Devenish says

Not a heartbreaker, and perhaps not his best, but by no means less than compelling all the same.

Kim says

My favourite books by Patrick Gale are 'Notes from an Exhibition' and 'A Perfectly Good Man'. I have also been collecting and reading all his back catalogue and must admit that, after the two shown above, this is the one I have enjoyed the most so far. Wonderful writing and great characters, you almost feel as if you are there with Sophie, Lucas and Charlie. In his notes at the end of my edition, Patrick mentions some similarities to Harry Potter, although I more equated the clever, bookish but rather shy Sophie more with Lyra from the Northern Lights series! Absolutely loved it!

Caren says

Returning to Patrick Gale's earlier publications (reissued in 2018), I note his ability to create multi-dimensional characters, a feature so significant in his later texts. In the essay he includes after the novel "No Exaggeration", Gale reveals the parallels between his own life and those of the gay adolescents he features in "Friendly Fire". In the novel, however, they are seen through the perspective of a well-drawn female, Sophie, an highly intelligent orphan who attends an academic boarding school on scholarship. The friendships between Sophie and her young, gay, male friends, reveal the emotional turmoil of adolescents struggling to be who they wish to be, often in contrast to the expectations others have of them. Set in the 1970s in Great Britain, the criminality of homosexuality stands in stark contrast, thankfully, to our world of today. Although I'm a fan of Gale's wide range of work, I found this novel to be somewhat uneven. At times, the writing was bogged down with stilted details about the nature of this esteemed British school that could have been condensed.

Yet, the stunning characterisations of Sophie, Lucas, and Charlie allow Gale to explore the angst of teenagers and the cycle of love, loyalty, betrayal, and loss that impact upon them. Gale manages also to capture the class distinctions and inherent prejudices in his created world, which adds significantly to the narrative and

to the readers' understanding of the forces that impose themselves on his young characters. Sophie and her friend Lucas, for example, are referred to as "the bastard and the Jew" by the harsh, aggressive mother of Charlie, whose life is made intolerable by her interference.

It is most interesting that the healthiest relationship between "mother" and teenaged child in the novel is that between Sophie and Margaret in the Children's Home, where Sophie has lived without a biological family since she'd been abandoned. The unpretentious Margaret is a model of acceptance and respect for Sophie, who comes to realise that she has actually been "mothered" for the many years of her residence in the Home.

Haldoor42 says

I always enjoy Patrick Gale's stories. They're told with that touch of humour that appeals to me, though this one in fact is somewhat less amusing than some of his previous books. Still, it's a worthwhile tale of an orphan living in a group home who gets the chance to attend a prestigious local school.

The small group of friends she eventually finds herself in, is one on the edges - something I could relate to, never having fit easily into any of the cliques at my own school - and the situation develops into something she is not quite prepared to cope with. The observations of her life, and how she and those around her deal with what she finds herself involved in, leading through sadness and pain, and eventually to a life that fits her perfectly, is well worth the read.

The typical English setting and 1970s atmosphere is also well described, and as always I walked away wishing I could write with the flair that Mr Gale shows.

Meera says

This was not at all what I expected from the back blurb, I was expecting it to be more of a teen romance set in a boarding school, but this is something darker, and much more compelling. It details the teenage years of Sophie, an intelligent orphan who wins a scholarship to an exclusive boarding school in the 70s (which I believe is loosely based on Winchester College), mostly full of boys and with only few girls, and lots of archaic practices. She forms a close, but strange, friendship with two upper class boys Lucas, who turns out to be gay, and then with Charlie (who isn't, but experiments with it), with destructive consequences for all three. I loved the period detail, and there are so many angles and messages (about class, money, love, culture, education, family relationships) to this book and the relationships between the characters. I also liked the way Gale satirizes upper class hypocrisies and shallowness - Charlie's mother is a comical, but horrendous, character. The more of Gale's books I read, the more I love him!

Sue says

Loved this too -read it very quickly as find it hard to stop reading Mr Gale's books

Plum-crazy says

This is the compelling tale of Sophie & three years of her life at boarding school where she befriends Lucas, & later Charlie, both of whom come from backgrounds alien to hers. While she studies hard at school Sophie is also learning some much harder lessons about class, families & mother-love...& of the chaos & heartbreak they can cause.

I loved this just as much as I hoped I would - highly recommended it.

Ian says

'Why is the whole world gay?' Sophie, the central character, exclaims about page 280. She may well ask. This well-written, ultimately powerful study of adolescent angst was unconvincing but worth reading.

Jayne Charles says

This is set in a boarding school full of ancient traditions and an intake of predominantly male students. You wouldn't need to know it was a Patrick Gale novel to suspect it might be a hotbed of homosexuality.

Seen through the eyes of Sophie, one of the school's only female students, who got in on a scholarship having been brought up in care, it is skilfully written – it isn't all about homosexual encounters though that's the main thrust of it.

Like all Patrick Gale's novels, it is full of interesting detail that keeps you wanting to read on even when nothing much is happening. It moves steadily towards its dramatic conclusion (which I didn't see coming), and whilst I found the last chapter a bit jarring, this was another great read from this consistently excellent author.

Louise says

Another cracking story from Gale.

I wasn't sure how it would go, with the characters being so much younger than all his other books I've read, but he did a fantastic job on both them and the story..
the three main children from different backgrounds, who come together and become such good friends, despite quite often not even liking each other rang very true.

Huw Rhys says

This rather mundane, superficial and ultimately predictable novel about a teenage girl growing up with two gay schoolchums is not Patrick Gale at his best, unfortunately.

Maybe because the book is written from the perspective of someone who is a generation younger than the author, Gale's usually pinpoint radar on the human condition is a little off tangent throughout this book. Whilst he says in the really useful authro's notes at the end of the book that writing from a young girl's perspective was a bit of a creative experiment for him, I'm afraid it wasn't an experiment that didn't completely work.

In the final few pages, the narrative voice admits that the main drama of the piece took place without her input really, this is actually true for the whole book - our narrator, Sophie, is very little more than a commentator on the relationship between Lucas and Charlie, her two gay schoolfriends. This inability to get insight into their internal ruminations is where the book ultimately lets itself down.

Nevertheless, as you'd expect from Patrick Gale, the prose is extremely readable, and even if the book falls down overall on his usual excellent standards, I'm not sorry I read this. It wasn't a difficult read at all.

Ellen says

Disappointing for Patrick who I usually love. I think it was more autobiographical which is fine if you're posh and could understand the private school system. I would've liked more on Sophie and how she came to be where she was.

Andrew Cox says

Reading Patrick Gale is such a joy. This book was different from the others I have read in that it was centred on one character and was seen entirely from her perspective. It was also far more about "gay" issues. Sophie was such a great character and I really felt for her. I love Patrick Gale.

The Idle Woman says

After reading *Facing the Tank*, I was keen to try some of Patrick Gale's other novels. By chance, I stumbled across *Friendly Fire*, which is set in the same town and focuses on the grand old boarding school, Tatham's, at its heart. Gale admits in his author's note that the school is a thinly-disguised version of his own alma mater at Winchester, and perhaps that's why the story shimmers with a kind of nostalgia. Like an adolescent version of *The Lessons* crossed with *The Secret History*, it follows the formidably bright Sophie and her friendship with the fascinating, flamboyant Lucas across the course of three tempestuous years. It's a tribute to intense adolescent friendship, a tale of trying to find one's place in a confusing world, and – perhaps above all – a love-letter to what happens when a thirsty mind meets a classical education...

For the rest of the review, please see my blog:

<https://theidlewoman.net/2017/08/18/f...>

