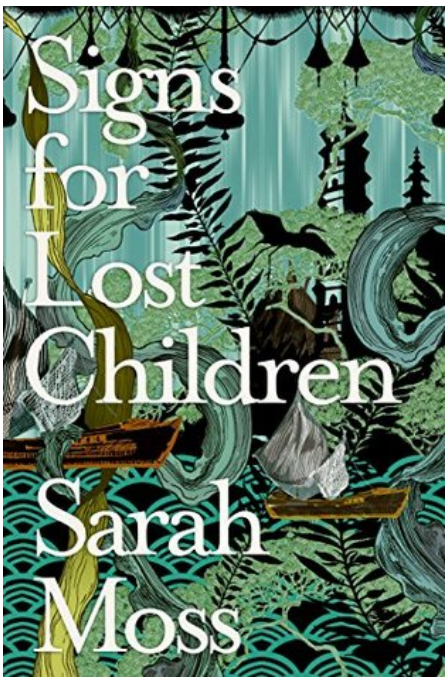

Signs for Lost Children

Sarah Moss

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Only weeks into their marriage a young couple embark on a six-month period of separation. Tom Cavendish goes to Japan to build lighthouses and his wife Ally, Doctor Moberley-Cavendish, stays and works at the Truro asylum. As Ally plunges into the institutional politics of mental health, Tom navigates the social and professional nuances of late 19th century Japan. With her unique blend of emotional insight and intellectual profundity, Sarah Moss builds a novel in two parts from Falmouth to Tokyo, two maps of absence; from Manchester to Kyoto, two distinct but conjoined portraits of loneliness and determination.

An exquisite continuation of the story of *Bodies of Light*, *Signs for Lost Children* will amaze Sarah Moss's many fans.

Signs for Lost Children Details

Date	:	Published July 2nd 2015 by Granta Books
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Author	:	Sarah Moss
Format	:	Kindle Edition 305 pages
Genre	:	Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Health, Mental Health, Cultural, Japan, Literary Fiction

From Reader Review Signs for Lost Children for online ebook

Beatrizmallow says

Wonderful as every Moss book. I've enjoyed every book in this loose trilogy and I'm very happy I get to know more about Ally's life.

Varsha Ravi (between.bookends) says

With this duology, I’m assured of Sarah Moss as a writer of incredible nuance, intelligence, observation, elegance, and style. Signs for Lost Children picks up just where Bodies of Light left, so I’d really encourage one to start with Bodies of Light before they try this as the motivations of these characters, the backstories and context would all be lost by starting directly here.

Bodies of Light triumphs in its themes, but rushes through the years. Signs for Lost Children, on the other hand, is set across a single year following Ally’s marriage. So in some respect, there’s more coherence to the plot, more substance to the characters. Just weeks into married life, the young couple face a period of separation with Tom heading off to Japan for a work assignment and Ally taking up the position as a doctor in the Truro mental asylum. The narrative then alternates between Ally and Tom, mapping their lives from Cornwall to Japan creating a dichotomous yet distinct ‘parallel lines, parallel lives’ kind-of story.

At its core Signs for Lost Children offers a fascinating deep-dive into the stigma of mental illnesses in the 19th century. Ally is such an interesting protagonist in her own sense as she herself suffers from anxiety issues stemming from the mental torture instigated by her own mother. Moss creates these incredibly claustrophobic scenes of being trapped in Ally’s head where you understand that she’s allowing herself to be hurt by her mother, and as a reader, you feel the pent-up frustration and yet an overwhelming feeling of empathy of what it means to be in that position. Incapacitated, by sheer lack of will to fight back.

Ally, thus, portrays a very unique position. She is both the physician and the patient, the healer and the sufferer, at once, and in a time when mental illnesses were not considered as ’real’ illnesses. Alternating with that are stunning descriptions of 19th century Japan, of the way mental illnesses there, were perceived as being possessed by mythical fox spirits and the curiosities of seeing this ancient culture from the eyes of a British man. The dual narrative braid into one another, charting each of their paths as they navigate loneliness and their own internal struggles. The only setback I felt was it dragged at parts.

Sarah Moss isn’t for everyone. There is a certain level of patience required to tackle a Sarah Moss novel, but the end result is rewarding in my opinion. Her stories aren’t plot-heavy, they aren’t filled with intrigue. Instead, they offer thorough insight into a particular topic, at a level that almost feels academic without being factual, interesting without being laborious, atmospheric without necessarily having any elements of mystery and through those layers, Moss shines.

Rating: 4/5

Jacqie says

I picked up this book because part of its focus was on Japan, not realizing that it continues the story of characters from a previous book. I don't think that affected my appreciation.

This is a sensitively written book. The characters all feel individual and their loneliness affected me.

Basic plot: a young engineer marries one of the first women in England to become a doctor. They seem simpatico and care for each other, but part of the reason they get married (quickly) is that he is going on an overseas assignment to work on construction of a lighthouse (his specialty). The two don't initially know where he is going because the destination is sensitive and is kept secret. Turns out it is Japan.

From here, the book splits while it follows Ally (the doctor) and Tom on their separate paths. Part of the poignancy of their separation is that Tom would love for Ally to come with him, but he knows that her profession is important to her and he doesn't want to force her to suspend her career to travel with him and have no occupation. Ally would like to be asked, but she feels strongly that she must establish herself as a doctor. The two never discuss this with each other. They understand each other well enough to roughly know what course the discussion would take, but it is one of those conversations that would be good to have in order to clear the air.

Most of the book is an interior study of what it's like to go through a sea change alone, while knowing that you are tied to someone else. Tom explores Japan and begins to fall in love with its culture, its craft, its beauty. Ally finds herself drawn to work in an asylum. You may already know that 19th century asylums were places where inconvenient women might find themselves inured for the rest of their lives. Ally has some nervous issues herself, a result of being raised with a rigid mother and louchely neglectful father. Being around other abused women and being exposed to their pain begins to unravel something in her. She keeps herself disconnected from the village in Cornwall where she has moved after her marriage, and refuses herself any comfort. The cottage in which she stays is permanently damp, she often doesn't have the energy to bother to feed herself. She tips between not heating her cottage to save coal and then needing to have a fire because her linens and clothes are starting to mildew due to the constant damp chill. After a breakdown, she goes to her mother, only to have the pain of her past escalated. Ally doesn't know how to care for herself, only how to care for others, and without any support she comes unmoored, losing her sense of self.

The bell curve of sanity is just one of the things explored. There's also the idea that loneliness can make a person lose themselves. I can be anxious myself, and it was painfully familiar to read through Ally's inner debates of what exactly she could allow herself. Her inner struggles were very believable and rendered with understanding.

Ally and Tom come back together, but are they really the same people? Can either of them understand the experiences of the other? Can the marriage continue? This sounds like it could be melodramatic, but I found it a sadly realistic view of two people who want to be together but don't know how to connect. I haven't spoiled the end for you, although I'd say the journey itself is the point of the book.

Rebecca says

Simply superb in the way it juxtaposes England and Japan in the 1880s and comments on mental illness, the place of women, and the difficulty of navigating a marriage whether the partners are thousands of miles apart or in the same room (“a part of the art of marriage must be to learn to see solitude in its double form”; “homes must be made, not given”). The settings are flawlessly rendered, including Cornwall, Manchester, London in Ally’s chapters; Osaka, Kyoto and an ocean liner in Tom’s. More so than in the other three of her novels I’ve read, each sentence is as carefully wrought as one of the *netsuke* Tom purchases on behalf of an English collector.

I’d hardly noticed it in the prequel (Bodies of Light), but here I was able to admire how the use of the present tense brings the action close, so that this doesn’t feel like historical fiction but like ever-present fiction: perfectly true in its observations on the human psyche. I also loved the metaphorical use of foxes and the lovely ending that comes full circle; it’s a perfect way to say goodbye to these characters I’d come to love over two volumes. Ally is, I expect, an ISTJ like me (or maybe an ISFJ), and I could sympathize with a lot of her feelings if not her experiences.

[This is the third Moss novel I’ve read this year; just one more (*Cold Earth*) and I will have read her whole output. Then I’ll have to wait for her to finish something new – argh!]

A favorite descriptive passage:

“They are leaving Osaka and there is snow on the ground, at first only a sifting, stones dark through grains of ice, and then more, a covering moulding itself to the shape of the land as a sheet rests over a body. Each tree bears its own ghost in snow, and the blades of Japanese flora, of bamboo and reeds, etch themselves black and vertical.”

Penny Hill says

Very intense and struggled at points but beautifully written. Japan elements were fascinating and clearly carefully researched. Ally's life continued to be tough as a result of her mother and abusive childhood. A tough read but appreciate the research and excellent writing.

Liisa says

Not quite as immersive as Bodies of Light, yet still really beautiful. Unfortunately I couldn't give it the attention it might have required as I was in a hurry to finish it - a reread of the whole series will have to happen at some point.

Sarah Rogers says

The quality of the writing deserves more than a three and I would definitely pick up another Sarah Moss novel. The issue for me was that she writes so convincingly (& at great length) about the pain and mental

suffering of many of her characters, notably Ally, that I struggled to believe in the redemptive, happier and more conventional parts.

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imyril says

Beautiful, wistful, painful - we rejoin Ally Moberley - now Doctor Ally Moberley-Cavendish - as she prepares to wave her new husband goodbye. Can their young marriage survive a separation of many months as he sets out to Japan? Left alone in a strange place, with the pressures of being not only one of England's first women doctors, but one of the first to work in an asylum, can Ally quiet her own unsettled mind or will her demons get the better of her? Alone in a country that is foreign in ways he could never imagine, can Tom stay true to his new wife, or will he be seduced by difference and distance? Can the young couple find their way home to one another?

This is feelings all the way down - fierce in its acknowledgement of the battles faced by women fighting for equality; gentle in its understanding of the battles faced by anyone who struggles with their mental health; and - above all else - clear in its message that it is kindness we should cherish above all else. That the worth of a life is not measured in hard work or self-sacrifice so much as in the small ways we can spend it caring for one another.

Sorry, Tom. It's all about Ally for me, and her journey here is a wonderful sequel to her struggles through Bodies of Light.

Patricia says

Random descriptive passages were what I most enjoyed about this novel. On Japanese art: "such a mind must look at a bowl of tea, and see not only each brushstroke on the bowl's glaze but the fall of light on each rising particle of steam."
Ally's campaign for decent treatment for women struggling with mental illness and Tom's travels in Japan were interesting ideas. The novel was riveting at times, but also hard going. Maybe because the dialog came out sounded stilted and that distanced me from the characters at times; it's got to be difficult to create a convincing 19th century sensibility.

Always Pink says

Wonderful sequel to Bodies of Light, a book I did not enjoy much, entirely my fault I am now sure. Sarah Moss' latest novel shows her trademark tenderness and care – in its finely wrought sentences and in the depictions of its characters, as well as in the workings of the mind of the two protagonists Ally and Tom. Ally also sees it as her life's essence: "To discover kindness, to discover that kindness is the only thing that matters." Both Tom and Ally possess this quality. Strangely, I found that an intriguing trait in a male character. Intriguing, but lovely: That he is willing and able to show kindness saves both his own and Ally's happiness, quite touching. – Ally's and Tom's stories after their (temporary) separation are both told with admirable restraint, it is somehow only fitting that Moss has chosen Japan and its aesthetics as background for Tom's withdrawal. That Ally works as a doctor in a mad house gives her solitude a much darker undertone, as she is contemplating and experiencing the fragility of a female mind formed by a damaging

family constellation.

Kat says

Didn't get very far - the writing style felt odd, like run-on, so became hard to follow. Probably should have given it more of a chance, so maybe I will, but not right now.

Kirsty says

Moss is fantastic, and this was the penultimate novel of hers which was outstanding for me. This is the sequel to *Bodies of Light* - which, I'll be honest, I don't think really needed a sequel. I did like the use of two separate stories here, which were connected through the sole fact of both protagonists being married. In *Signs for Lost Children*, Moss presents a fascinating look into Victorian-era asylum practices, and, unsurprisingly, it is incredibly well written and researched. A good continuation to the original story was provided, and the story here is rich and multi-layered.

Lynda says

This is I think a rather unworthy sequel to the gruelling 'Bodies Of Light'. It continues the story of Tom, the lighthouse engineer and Aly the doctor. This is a novel of two journeys : the physical and then metaphysical journey of Tom to Kyoto in Japan where he appears to do very little of the work he was commissioned to do but embarks on a spiritual and cultural exploration of Japanese culture and belief systems set alongside the painful psychological journey of his wife Alys who travels from London to Falmouth in West Cornwall and takes up employment in a psychiatric institution. The narrative journeys of both Aly and Tom unfold through the structure of short alternate chapters which though at times I found irritating on the whole works very well. Moss is an acute observer of the natural world and the Japanese chapters are suffused with beautiful lyrical imagery whilst she also captures perfectly the endless mizzle of winter in West Cornwall where nothing really is ever dry.

Sometimes Moss's work has an almost fairytale , mythic quality. The tale has a wicked mother, an absent father, a drowned sister as well as an Aunt and Uncle was charming house in London reminds me of the Darlings abode in Peter Pan. There are also references to The Tempest and The Odyssey.

Why was I a bit underwhelmed. Not sure really. Think I was just enthralled by Bodies of Light which was an extraordinay exposure of multiple abuse.

Both novels highly recommended

Tutankhamun18 says

Two great stories told side by side, Tom's discovery of japanese jewels and their underapprechiation by

Westerners, and particularly De Rivers, the collector for who they are destined, and Ally's discovery of insane women and the underapprechiation that their institution of marriage plays in their "madness". Their marriage struggles through these discoveries. Beautiful details in descriptions of japanese objects and mundane conversations between sane women. A nice read!

Tripfiction says

Novel set in Falmouth and Japan (“an exquisite novel of the 1880s”)

One of the Financial Times Best Books of 2015.

It is the1880s. Tom and Ally are recently married but Tom’s job takes him to Japan where he is to advise on building a lighthouse, whilst Ally keeps the home fires burning in Falmouth. She is one of the first women to qualify as a doctor and is dipping her toe in the water and trying to reform the care and treatment of women with mental health issues, who are incarcerated in a local asylum.

Improving conditions in such an institution is a thankless task and Ally struggles to make headway with both the patients and the embedded strictures of the place. All the while the cutting voice of her mother burrows away in her head – her mother impresses on Ally time and again, how she, virtuously and with no self regard, has sacrificed everything in her life to be able to devote herself to the needs of the poor, but by so doing has alienated her family members through her haranguing self denial. Ally is in a permanent state of anxiety and apprehension around her mother, whether she is physically present or not.

Tom – whilst in Kyoto, Japan – has been tasked to bring back items of Japanese art and finery for a collector in Falmouth, and relishes the newness and difference that he encounters in this utterly foreign land. The quality of the author’s description is beguiling and nuanced.

There are many different levels in this book, strands that weave and come together. Tom is learning about Japanese folklore, and understanding how madness is explained away by the notion that foxes inhabit the brains of the mentally unstable (yet paradoxically they are also revered on occasion). This neatly dovetails with the work that Ally is doing back in Falmouth. Her work, however, continues to be exacerbated by her own mother’s continually droning ‘voice’, her acute self denial governs still governs Ally’s every move. It is clear that the author has a great interest in mental health issues.

Both husband and wife struggle to understand the unique environment in which they each find themselves and each has to face their own demons and disconnectedness, which then reverberate back into their marital dynamics. Can they resurrect some kind of connection and normality once Tom returns from his travels, or have their personal and individual experiences changed them beyond repair?

There are wonderful little insights into the culture of the time, especially in Japan, where, for example in Tokyo there was already piped water, whilst in London the authorities were still struggling with typhoid and cholera (and cholera, of course is spread through contaminated water, as the authorities soon come to discover). The ‘Signs for Lost Children’ of the title is a phenomenon Tom discovers whilst out in Japan, and that strand appears in various guises – often ephemeral – throughout. There is also evident delight in the objets d’art that Tom sources – the cloths and the delicately carved netsuke, and pleasure in the little observations of Japanese Custom, beautifully rendered. A rewarding and well written book with creatively tackled subject matter. The book deserves a wider audience.

This review first appeared on the TripFiction blog: Both husband and wife struggle to understand the unique environment in which they each find themselves and each has to face their own demons and disconnectedness, which then reverberate back into their marital dynamics. Can they resurrect some kind of connection and normality once Tom returns from his travels, or have their personal and individual experiences changed them beyond repair?

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