



## Hester and Harriet

*Hilary Spiers*

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## **Hester and Harriet** Hilary Spiers

When widowed sisters, Hester and Harriet, move together into a comfortable cottage in a pretty English village, the only blights on their cosy landscape are their crushingly boring cousins, George and Isabelle, who are determined that the sisters will never want for company. Including Christmas Day.

On their reluctant drive over to Christmas dinner, the sisters come across a waif-like young girl, hiding with her baby in a disused bus shelter. Seizing upon the perfect excuse for returning to their own warm hearth, Hester and Harriet insist on bringing Daria and Milo home with them.

But with the knock at their front door the next day by a sinister stranger looking for a girl with a baby, followed quickly by their cousins' churlish fifteen-year-old son, Ben, who also appears to be seeking sanctuary, Hester and Harriet's carefully crafted peace and quiet quickly begins to fall apart.

With dark goings-on in the village, unlooked-for talents in Ben, and the deeper mysteries in Daria's story, Hester and Harriet find their lives turned upside down. And, perhaps, it's exactly what they need.

## **Hester and Harriet Details**

Date : Published November 1st 2015 by Allen & Unwin (first published October 1st 2015)

ISBN :

Author : Hilary Spiers

Format : Kindle Edition 314 pages

Genre : Fiction, Mystery, Contemporary, Humor

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## From Reader Review Hester and Harriet for online ebook

### Sandy \*The world could end while I was reading and I would never notice\* says

A delightful read. Hester and Harriet only serves to strengthen my belief that there is far more going on in these sleepy English villages than is immediately apparent to the casual observer.

There is no murder, a little mystery and intrigue, but mostly this is just a 'feel good' book. If you need a break from the darker reads, I can heartily recommend this.

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### Shaz Goodwin says

<http://www.jerasjamboree.co.uk/2016/0...>

Widowed Hester and Harriet live in the next village to their cousin George and wife Isabelle. George thinks they need company, not realising they are happy as they are - the deliberate 'batty old woman' faces they show to keep people away obviously has the opposite effect! As we get to know the sisters and their love of home cooking/the best ingredients and the difference between Hester and Isabelle's cooking, I didn't blame them for not wanting to go ...

On the way to George's on Christmas Day they see the bundle in the disused bus shelter (and it isn't Finbar - homeless by choice and living in the bus shelter) and Daria and Milo enter their life. Not long after, George's son Ben arrives on their doorstep looking for refuge. Ben not only disrupts their routines but he surprises them again and again (which I loved). In the course of a week, they change the sisters' comfortable and plodding lives.

The sisters are easy to tell apart with their different strengths and weaknesses and the roles they play within their home. I thought Daria's situation brought them closer together - not only because they were a team in trying to unravel and then solve the problems or even because Milo softened the edges but they learned new things about themselves too and were able to start opening up to each other. Ben is also a catalyst. Hester and Harriet, without a doubt, have an impact on him but he also teaches them in subtle ways too. And oh the situations they get themselves into - I loved how fearless they were (at least on the surface) and didn't think twice about just getting on and doing the things they needed to do.

I can't write my review without mentioning Finbar. Such an interesting and eccentric character ... he has it sussed really. The first time the sisters rescue him is quite humorous. I would love to know more about him.

The main story itself is very current, dealing with issues that are emotional to society as a whole. The subplots weave through and I loved the pace of the story. Hilary Spiers writing style drew me in:

Time hovers accommodately in the kitchen as Hester considers her response. Pg 120

How visual is this personification! The words on the page are brought to life.

Hester and Harriet is a story that captured my imagination. I felt as if I was living with them all whether that was cosy in the kitchen or walking on painful feet from my heeled shoes where I had dressed to impress ... I

felt the uncertainty, the fear and elation and fell in love with Milo myself! I didn't want the story to end.

I would like to thank the publishers for providing a copy in exchange for an honest review.

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### **Kate says**

Reviewed as part of the promotional tour, for which I received a free copy of the book. Review also published at If These Books Could Talk

Widowed sisters, Hester and Harriet live the cosy village life, keeping themselves very much to themselves. Only socialising when they absolutely have to, they see the world around them through very narrow eyes. Those eyes are opened wide when not only do they find their errant teenage nephew Ben on their doorstep, seeking an escape from his pushy parents, but they discover a young woman, scared, alone and desperately protecting her small baby. Through their actions, and by opening up themselves and their beloved home to these strangers, the sisters discover that maybe they've isolated themselves from too much, for too long.

'Hester and Harriet' is a joyous débüt from (among other things) playwright Hilary Spiers, that takes the 'cosy mystery' genre one step further by combining a genuine mystery with social commentary and a wry swipe at the insularity of village life, especially within a certain age bracket. Spiers has created in the two sisters a yin/yang partnership: both are quick to point out the other's flaws or faux pas, but equally they support each other to the end, no matter the situation. Harriet is the more worldly of the two -a former teacher, very much in tune with world events and social issues – and it is her who is the more open to the pair's new situation. Hester, on the other hand, is judgemental, reserved, and slow to forgive or open up to new experiences, causing many riffs, not only with Harriet but with their guests. Harriet is the more likeable of the partnership, and it's very easy to bond with her as a character. Hester on the other hand, I found to be horrid most of the time, and her relentless chastising of teenager Ben became a chore by the first third of the novel, so by the time you approach the end of the novel and it's still happening, I kind of zoned out on her character.

Ben is a delight. Clearly misunderstood and not given enough credit by his parents, the slow reveal of his many hidden talents is an earnest look at how, as a society, we really don't do the younger generation justice. There's loads of Ben's out there, but unfortunately, there's also an equal amount of Hesters, eager to decry anything and anyone that doesn't meet their immediate expectations. Daria, the young girl found hiding in a bus shelter, feels underdeveloped and merely their as a plot point. All she seems to do is weep, feed her baby, or recount in broken English how she came to be in this situation. She forms a strong bond with Ben, but other than a few moments of fun, there's little else to flesh out her personality.

Spiers' background in the theatre is recognizable in the narrative for 'Hester and Harriet' as it often reads like extremely precise stage instructions: every action is described in minute detail and while at times it adds to the atmosphere, there are sections of the novel where it does drag a touch. A game of bridge feels like unnecessary padding that deviates too far away from the plot, and what's divulged within could easily be placed in another, snappier situation. The language within the novel could be toned down a touch (it's little bit 'thesaurus heavy') but there's no denying Spiers' talent for atmosphere as she takes a fairly mundane setting ( a village cottage) and makes it come alive every time. Again, I have no doubt that's partly down to her background in the theatre (she's also directed and acted) but it takes a natural talent to write so immersively.

‘Hester And Harriet’ is a great ‘lose yourself’ read with a strong, but not overpowering and preachy, message and a solid start to a publishing career.

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### **Bruce Gargoyle says**

Ten Second Synopsis:

Hester and Harriet, geriatric sisters, offer refuge to a young woman and her baby in an attempt to get out of having Christmas lunch with odious relatives. When their young nephew Ben turns up also requesting sanctuary, the term "silly season" comes into play, as the ladies and their charges grapple with international migration laws, ridiculously named private detectives and cleaning up after oneself in the kitchen.

The best bit of this book for me was the young nephew character, Ben. He is comic relief, a breath of fresh air and his growth through the novel is enjoyable to witness. The plot is perfect for an extended holiday or beach read. Nothing too untoward happens and there are lots of quirky characters to get behind, such as Finbar, the homeless classics master. He was quite refreshing in his scenes and a handy source of new information.

On the other hand, this book is slow. There are lots of discussions between the two sisters that really slow down the action, and this, coupled with the fact that Daria is unnecessarily furtive about her past, means that new information must be wrung from the pages by clawing hands. Also, I couldn't tell the difference between Hester and Harriet. One is good at cooking and one gets quite shirty about Ben using the kitchen (this is possibly the same sister), but given the two “H” names and not much of a difference in personality or manner between them, I just thought of them as a conglomerate old person spread over two bodies.

Overall this was a relaxing read that is perfectly adequate to fill a cosy-shaped hole in your reading heart.

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### **Sally906 says**

HESTER AND HARRIET was a very enjoyable read centred around two elderly sisters with an appreciation for the finer things in life – something I can only aspire to. There is humour, kindness and a determination to make things right along with a gentle message that sometimes family is the one we choose rather than the one we are born into. From the moment they open their hearts and home to Daria and her baby boy there is intrigue and mystery. Daria is a foreign refugee who has fled to England for safety after political upheaval in her country and a series of circumstances has meant that she is now in England with an expired visa through no fault of her own; she needs kindness and help. Ben is a typically unaware teen male who has hidden depths that his aunts manage to bring out of him as he hides from his parents after a family disagreement. Harriet and Hester, along with Ben, set out to keep Daria a secret while they work out how she got into her predicament, who is hunting for her and how they can save her.

The story is a wonderful blend of comedy and drama that is set against a background of an English country village, local gossip and a cast of quirky support characters – aren’t they all quirky in English villages? The mystery behind Daria is gradually unveiled and Harriet and Hester are delightful amateur sleuths. I sometimes got the two sisters muddled up, but it didn’t matter because they worked as one unit. There were a couple of minor characters that appealed to me as well – the main one being a hobo called Finbarr.

The writing is beautiful and some of the old rarely used words just rolled off the tongue – such as consanguinity and lugubrious. The two sisters are constantly corrected Ben’s grammar, and his poor use of the correct tense, and I applauded this. So many youngsters today, and even some older people, talk as if they’re texting. The English language is beautiful – use it. Don’t be lulled into thinking this is a light and fluffy read, sure there are lots of food and wine discussions but there are some serious issues going on that are gently brought out into the open without feeling as though we are being lectured.

*With thanks to Allen & Unwin and the author for this copy to read and review.*

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### **Book Bazaar says**

A gorgeous novel! This has gone to the top of my recommendations for Christmas. Quirky characters, a small English village, a young refugee Mum on the run and a love of good food. Perfect for any age and safe to give to Nanna or your sister.

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### **Kathleen Dixon says**

Hester and Harriet are two retired and widowed sisters and, apart from suffering some terribly boring relatives, are content with their lives. But their lives are suddenly invaded - first by a young woman and her baby that they rescued from a bus shelter on a freezing cold Christmas Day, and second by the 15-year-old son (Ben) of their (terribly boring) cousins, George and Isabelle.

This book is comedy and drama all the way through. The sisters and Ben give the reader many laughs, while the story includes much social comment. I read this book over several weeks - twice a week in my quarter hour lunch break at work - and the characters and situation were strong enough that I never had a problem getting right back into the story, nor in remembering what had happened when last I picked it up. The mystery of Daria and her baby is gradually uncovered and the reader finds all the local gossip and odd-bod characters fitting together with the main narrative so that finally all is made clear.

An excellent read - I shall look out what else this author has written.

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### **Jacq says**

Utterly delightful, full of charming characters and situations that go from the sensible to the outrageous in splendid fashion!

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### **Marianne says**

Hester and Harriet is the first book in the Hester and Harriet series by British author, Hilary Spiers. Hester Greene and Harriet Pearson are “late middle-aged” widows living together in Pellington, the next village to their well-meaning cousin George, his wife Isabelle and their rather sullen son, Ben. On their reluctant way

to another boring and probably inedible Christmas Day lunch, they pick up a waif taking cover in a disused bus shelter, a young woman with a baby, the perfect excuse to head home.

Before they have even had a chance to find out much about Daria and her just-months-old son, Milo, “nephew” Ben turns up on their doorstep, wanting respite from his parents. And when a private detective turns up looking for Daria, Hester and Harriet know they need answers. Trying to keep Daria’s situation under the radar of the village gossip, whilst also dealing diplomatically with Ben and his parents, certainly presents a challenge for these two feisty ladies. And that’s before others turn up in search of mother and baby, and a certain elderly gent in a hospital ward claims Hetty and Harry as his estranged sisters.

In this charming tale, Spiers gives the reader an original plot with a twist or two, while touching on several topical issues: the plight of refugees and asylum-seekers, the pressure of career choice, the rights of the indigent, the devastating effects of cot death. She populates her novel with a cast of delightful characters, quirky but easily believable: the teen wedded to his iPhone, the indigent gentleman scholar, the dodgy local businessman, the alcoholic wife, the anxious parents.

*Hester and Harriet* is a very enjoyable read: in amongst the serious topics there are plenty of laugh-out-loud moments and some wonderful descriptive prose. The sisters are a likeable pair whose flaws and foibles make them all the more appealing. Readers who enjoy *Hester and Harriet* will be pleased to know their story is continued in the sequel, *Love, Lies and Lingueine*. Recommended!

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## **Tripfiction says**

This review first appeared on our blog, where we also talk to the author about writing and more:  
<http://www.tripfiction.com/19341-2/>

As sisters Hester and Harriet are driving out over the Christmas period to visit relations, they spy a young woman hiding with a little baby in a bus shelter. They grind to a halt in their car and before they know it, they have invited her to stay with them, as she looks utterly miserable – and it is after all the season of goodwill. It also means they can turn the car around and go home, back to their cosy abode, and thus avoid their duty visit.

Daria and her son Milo are, it transpires, from Belarus and as the story unfolds they discover that she had to flee her homeland after her father and brother fell foul of the authorities there. This is not the country where hardy peasants in bright ethnic garb and stout boots cultivate the unforgiving soil, it is much bleaker....

Soon to join the party is their nephew, Ben, escaping his parents’ claustrophobic strictures (they were it seems just doing their parental thing). He morphs from a stereotypical grunting teenager into a young man who develops some good cooking skills under the sisters’ tutelage. So, for Hester and Harriet they suddenly have a house full of guests who need succour and food. And that’s what they do best!

But Daria’s nervousness is further heightened when a stranger calls at their door, looking for a mother and young child and soon the sisters are sleuthing away to understand what is going on.

This is an entertaining read set in Hampshire (the environs of Basingstoke to be precise), but specific locale is not an intrinsic feature of the book; yet it is indubitably English, it really couldn’t be set anywhere other

than England.

I visualised the sisters with their eager tipples and culinary delights, as simulacrum of the cooks in the TV series Two Fat Ladies, Clarissa Dickson Wright and Jennifer Paterson, an image ingrained in my imagination that simply would not budge. Or Miriam Margolyes or Rosemary Shrager in the TV show "The Real Marigold Hotel".... With astutely observed characters, conniptions aplenty (yes, there are lots of unusual words peppering the text!), this novel has a light feel to it. It grazes the darker side of what it means to be a refugee, illustrates the issue of illegal immigration and balances it all with a good dollop of the kindness of strangers.

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### **Bianca says**

You can tell I'm in a reading slump as it took me 1 week!!! to finish this novel. True, I've been doing other stuff, and I seem to have gotten back my photography mojo, which had pretty much deserted me in the past year or so. Right, back to the subject at hand, 'Hester and Harriet'.

First of all, I felt like such a dufus for assuming that Hester was a guy's name. Hester and Harriet are two widowed, retired sisters, living a quiet and comfortable life in a village in England. Their life is uneventful and has been like that for many years. All they've got is each other, as none of them had children.

But all this coziness turns on its head when, on Christmas Day, they come across a very young foreign woman with a baby, hiding in a disused bus shelter. Upon realising she had nowhere to go, they take it upon themselves to offer to give them shelter in their home. As if they didn't have enough to deal with, their fifteen-year-old nephew, Ben, shows at their door seeking sanctuary from his overbearing, well-intentioned parents.

And so, they were two, but now they are five. The sisters are puzzled by Daria. They come to discover that she's from Belarus, and they are ashamed that they don't know much about that country. But they have the best intentions where Daria and her adorable baby, Milo, are concerned. As for the nephew, grunty, pimply, attached-to-his-mobile phone Ben, they're not that keen on him, but they don't have the heart to renege on their sanctuary.

Of course, things become more complicated. Some bad guys come into the picture. Is Daria who she says she is? Now the sisters embark on finding out if Daria told the truth, and how to help her stay in the UK. I'll leave it at that as I already said too much. You can think of the two sisters as Ms Marple x 2, but in more contemporary British setting.

'Hester and Harriet' is a delightful novel. There were so many things that I liked about it. It was refreshing to have heroines who are past their prime. I love it when ordinary people become heroes through circumstance and/or through their actions.

The writing is really good and has a great flow. It's detail oriented, but I didn't mind it. Also, the vocabulary used is elevated, nothing to be scared of, I needed to use the Dictionary a few times, but as I said it before, I enjoy learning so I appreciated the opportunity. I loved how both sisters were correcting Ben's grammar incessantly.

I thought Hillary Spiers did a great job at presenting one of the issues Britain grapples with these days -

immigration. One can have set ideas about what/how things are or should be but "... *how the sands shift once matters become personal. At a remove, there would be no doubt as to the correct course of action. Now, however, those certainties have been shaken by events, of greater significance, by their growing attachment to Daria and Milo.*"

I'll close my review by saying that 'Hester and Harriet' is a novel that accomplishes being fun yet serious, irreverent, sardonic yet touching, with a good dose of realism. The character development was absolutely fantastic.

Here's to unlikely heroes and heroines!

4 stars

**Cover:** 4.5 stars

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## **Veronica ?? says**

### **3.5 stars**

Sisters Hester and Harriet live together now that they are both widowed. They are happy to live a quiet, monotonous life and like nothing better than to be left alone.

Their comfortable, mundane world is about to come crashing down when first they find a young girl with a small baby huddled in a bus shelter then their 15 year old nephew arrives on their doorstep begging to stay with them for a few days.

What ensues is a week of danger, adventure and soul searching for the two sisters.

This was a slow paced story but none the less intriguing with a few mysteries although not eye opening, were interesting.

The character of Ben was well done with typical teenage language and attitude.

Hester and Harriet at times were indistinguishable and I'm not sure if this was because their names were so similar or because they kept slipping out of character.

Hilary Spiers' writing is catchy and humorous but by page 8 I stopped looking up the meaning of words I didn't know. I was starting to feel like some uneducated dolt.

A good read if you are after something light and fun.

With my thanks to First Reads and the publisher for my uncorrected proof copy to read and review.

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## **Andrea says**

2.5★

I wish I had liked it a bit more than I did. It seemed to have all the right ingredients; an unlikely ensemble cast of characters, a bit of sleuthing, lots of food and wine, and some social issues thrown in for good measure. But in the end, for me, it wasn't dramatic enough to be a good drama, nor humorous enough to be a good comedy. However, thanks to the extremely erudite and loquacious indigent former- Classics master, Finbar, I did learn a few new words!!

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## **Phrynne says**

I guess this one just creeps into the genre of cosy mystery since the Hester and Harriet of the title unintentionally become temporary sleuths. Having given refuge to a young runaway and her baby they then have to shield her from danger and try to discover the girl's true story. It all makes for a fun, entertaining tale. I liked Hester and Harriet, sisters and widows, getting along with their lives in their own comfortable ways. It was nice to see them open their doors to a variety of people in need, although admittedly with a few grumbles.

The quirky English village setting is well known from so many mysteries and detective novels, but it was done quite well. Of course there was a village gossip, an unhappy vicar's wife, a business man threatening their way of life with building developments and more but they were all well written.

There was plenty of humour too. Hester and Harriet provided much of it in their conversations and asides and Ben was brilliant. I did wonder though how a fifteen year old, only child knew so much about caring for babies. (Perhaps he Googled it.)

Interestingly there was a serious thread to the whole book too - a fair bit of social commentary but done with a very light touch.

Overall a light, enjoyable read and I will be following up with the sequel Love, Lies and Linguine

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## **Liana says**

A wonderfully gorgeous story about two elderly sisters who open up their house and their hearts to three unsuspecting people - one of whom they're related to and the other two who are lost in a country they know nothing about.

The story is so beautifully crafted and puts me in mind of Fredrik Backman's "A Man Called Ove". Although not quite as funny or as outrageous as that story this one brings to mind a sense of a family that is not necessarily the ones we're born with but ones that we choose.

The characters are very likeable - or more so loveable with Hester and Harriet being a couple of low key detectives in a way. There were times when I got the two mixed up but wasn't all that fussed about it. The story flowed all the same. The relationships between them all was a bit of touch and go at times but you got to witness the fondness and respect that each one had for the others and how much it grew to knit them all together.

A beautiful story. One to put a smile on the face and even bigger one on the heart.

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