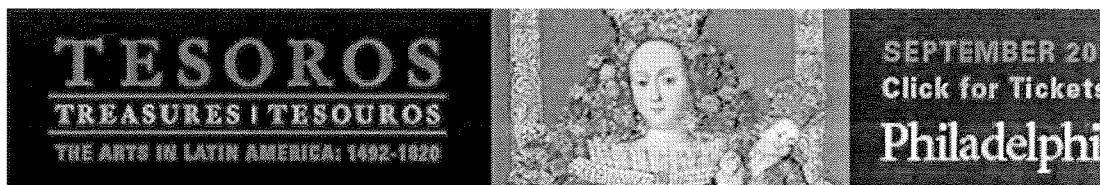


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A dizzying novel of ideas, ultimately craving clarity

The End of Mr. Y
By Scarlett Thomas

Harcourt. 402 pp. \$14

Reviewed by Mark Sarvas

That hoary workhorse, "the novel of ideas," gets an invigorating kick in the pants in Scarlett Thomas' imaginative new novel *The End of Mr. Y*. Among the ideas on offer for our reading pleasure, one can choose from the works of Samuel Butler, Schrödinger's Cat, Erasmus Darwin's Zoonomia, relativity vs. quantum mechanics, the power of prayer, Jacques Derrida, homeopathy, the search for LUCA (the Last Universal Common Ancestor), Victorian science (luminiferous ether, anyone?), Heidegger's *Being and Time*, and the genetics of laboratory mice. And that's a partial listing.

But *The End of Mr. Y* is considerably more than a precocious recitation of seemingly disparate ideas. It is, above all, an exhilarating, breakneck narrative that leaves the reader dizzily impressed with Thomas' brio and talent as she takes each new preposterous plot development (an 8-foot-tall mouse god? a secret government plan for mind control?) and makes it utterly convincing.

The story concerns itself with a cursed book - the eponymous *The End of Mr. Y*, a lost Victorian novel - said to have the power to kill all who read it, which comes into the possession of Ariel Manto, the brilliant, disaffected graduate student who narrates the tale. (The disappointing ease with which Ariel obtains the supposedly rare book is one of Thomas' few narrative missteps.) Curiosity trumps fear, and Ariel, a specialist in the arcane discipline of "thought experiments," devours the book, learning its great secret: Detailed instructions on how to enter the "Troposphere," a sort of alternative dimension where all human thought is connected, and where visitors can surf from the thoughts of one person to another via a method called "Pedesis." But the Troposphere is

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simultaneously addictive and deadly to humans. And it's a powerful secret people will kill for. Along the way, Ariel must stay out of the clutches of deadly government operatives and contend with a benevolent if demanding mouse god called Apollo Smintheus (the "Lord of the Mice" or "mouse god" noted by Homer in *The Iliad*).

This all might sound a bit complicated and bizarre, but Thomas has carefully thought out all the rules of her alternative universe, and although there are many and they sometimes blur, the internal logic of the book feels utterly consistent and true to itself. In fact, much of the fun comes from figuring out these rules along with Ariel. Although a handful of scenes read like dorm-room bull sessions gone on too long, the readers willing to turn themselves over to this witty and thought-provoking adventure will be rewarded with nothing less than an end of mystery (the Mr. Y of the punning title). For all the intellectual flights of fancy, Thomas' fundamental thesis - the interconnectedness of, more or less, everything - is an eternally potent one:

In the end I pray for meaning. I pray for the limits of reality to become clear. For a world - and a type of being - that makes sense. I pray for a life after death that is not like this life. I pray for the end of mystery. What would a life be like with all the mysteries solved?

The book's most serious defect is that Thomas has not applied the same rigor to her characters as she has to her narrative. The large cast of secondary characters, though distinctive, isn't especially deep. And Ariel, in particular, suffers from a missing layer, something that would make her cynicism, her tendency to nihilism and destructive sexual behavior, feel more anchored and earned. Her past is glossed - drunk father, self-absorbed mother - but it's not enough to account for the demons that appear to prey upon this otherwise vivid character as she guides us through the labyrinth.

And vivid she is. There's a daredevil brilliance that imbues Ariel's voice and that makes the book irresistible, especially if you like your narrators smart. Ariel Manto - like Scarlett Thomas - has smarts and style in spades, and it's impossible not to get caught up in her quest.

Thomas has come far from her early days as one of Britain's New Puritans, who devoted themselves to stripped-down simplicity, shunning "poetic license" and "devices of voice." On her Web site, Thomas has cited Umberto Eco's 1989 novel *Foucault's Pendulum* as one of the books that changed her, and its influence on *The End of Mr. Y* is unmistakable. Eco's tour de force was a similarly capacious "novel of ideas," focusing on a shadowy conspiracy of the Knights Templar. *The End of Mr. Y* is a *Foucault's Pendulum* for the iPod generation and, like its forebear, it's a fearless book best read with a dictionary (or Google) in one hand and an encyclopedia in the other. And with seat belts tightly fastened.

Mark Sarvas, a Los Angeles writer, hosts the literary Web log *The Elegant Variation* (www.elegvar.com).

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