

BOOK WARS

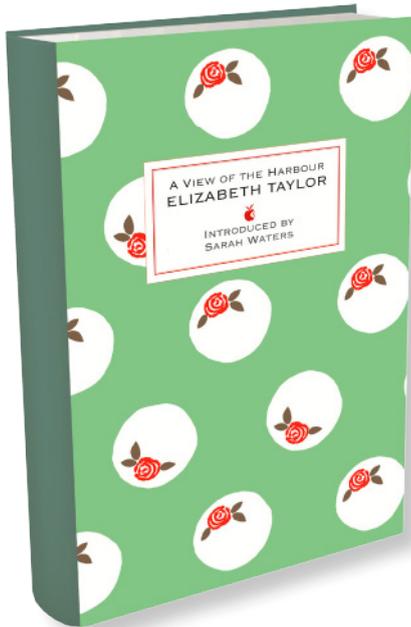
TWO COASTAL
TALES BATTLE IT OUTA VIEW OF THE HARBOUR VS
THE LAST KINGS OF SARK*A Virago Modern Classic and a debut novelist offer contrasting views of life beside the seaside*A VIEW
OF THE
HARBOUR**Stylist's deputy
production
editor Amy
Adams backs****Elizabeth Taylor's *A View Of The Harbour* (£12.99, Virago), out now**

I can sympathise with Elizabeth Taylor – it isn't easy sharing a name with a Hollywood star. The writer has perhaps come off worse than myself, though, with her own legacy so eclipsed by the violet-eyed actress that some believe it's the reason she isn't up there with the literary greats. Author Sarah Waters, who introduces this edition of *A View Of The Harbour*, argues she's one of the great under-appreciated British writers of the 20th century.

Her third novel, originally published in 1947, gently yet determinedly reinforces this opinion. Her subtle humour and knack for describing the foibles and vanities of a cast of characters puts you in mind of Jane Austen – albeit in the crumbling coastal village of post-war Newby rather than Pemberley.

Among the novel's many protagonists there's flirty newcomer Bertram, bed-ridden village gossip Mrs Bracey, tight-lipped doctor Robert and elegant, flighty divorcee Tory. And to each of these, Taylor's witty insight brings depth and charm: Mrs Bracey "would have missed so much if her imagination had not run before her, preparing the way" and for elderly Bertram, old age would "always impend, never reach him".

In this vein we spend a few months in Newby, privy to the emotions that occasionally bubble to the surface only to be suppressed



once more. There's an affair, there's a death, but no major incident makes the villagers' lives more remarkable than others; Taylor's talent is finding the idiosyncrasy in the ordinary and exposing the myth of the everyman.

The Last Kings Of Sark is also set in a holiday destination – in this case the Channel Island of Sark. Here the quiet, seasonal life is a cauldron for intense friendship and youthful experimentation until one night changes everything. Or at least it's meant to, but in hinging her novel like this, Rosa Rankin-Gee creates a sense of anticipation that can't help but fall slightly flat. In the end, Taylor's ability to avoid melodrama and find life in the shadows proves more successful. Hopefully this beautiful edition with its Celia Birtwell cover will introduce her subtle charms to a wider audience.

★★★★☆

THE LAST
KINGS
OF SARK**Stylist contributor
Laura Price fights
for *The Last Kings
Of Sark* by Rosa
Rankin-Gee (£14.99, Virago) out now**

I know I shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but the moment I set eyes on the silhouetted beach scene on *The Last Kings Of Sark*, I knew I was going to like it. The sun hitting the camera straight on and the carefree figures beneath the yellow-green sky reminded me of those youthful last days of summer when a holiday romance is coming to an end. It's easy to convince yourself it's forever, when in reality it rarely lasts beyond the flight home.

Debut author Rosa Rankin-Gee perfectly captures that feeling and creates a set of young characters

you won't want to say goodbye to. Twenty-one-year-old Jude ("Because of Law, Hey and the Obscure, they thought I was a boy") goes to the tiny, carless Channel Island of Sark for the summer to tutor Pip, an awkward teenage boy who really is the last person to need tuition. Jude strikes up an unlikely friendship with Sofi, the family cook, and the three live out of each other's pockets for the summer. Rankin-Gee plays with different narrative styles to contrast the moments of adventure experienced by Jude, Sofi and Pip with the remote setting and the more serious shadow of Pip's sick mother, Esme.

A View Of The Harbour is set in the similarly stark and isolated coastal village of Newby, where complicated relationships between the inward-looking neighbours play out behind closed doors. Elizabeth Taylor's cast of characters are more interested in keeping up appearances than their modern-day equivalents, but in many ways, their lives are just as messy as Rankin-Gee's youngsters.

Both authors do a fantastic job of portraying life as a series of moments, and both made me laugh out loud with their witty observations. But, for me, Rankin-Gee's dream-filled young characters were more relatable, and the narrative style much more compelling. Jude took me back to summers gone by and, as her days on Sark came to an end, I wanted time to stand still for her. Because you know once you step on that plane home, nothing will ever be the same again.

★★★★☆

THE VERDICT: DISCOVER THE OTHER ELIZABETH TAYLOR

For both of this week's novels the seaside offers the perfect narrative device – a faded windswept village of brooding figures in *A View From The Harbour*, and a remote sun-kissed island providing the perfect backdrop for young love in *The Last Kings Of Sark*. But despite the less sunny outlook, Elizabeth Taylor's reissued title creates the more enveloping world, one of endearingly flawed characters that you can imagine living on well after the final page.

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