

Women's Prize for Fiction 2021



2021 SHORTLIST

PIRANESI by SUSANNA CLARKE

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Susanna Clarke's debut novel *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* was published in more than 34 countries and was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize, shortlisted for the Whitbread First Novel Award and the *Guardian* First Book Award. It won the British Book Awards Newcomer of the Year, the Hugo Award and the World Fantasy Award. She is also the author of *The Ladies of Grace Adieu*, a collection of short stories, some set in the world of *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*. Susanna Clarke lives in Derbyshire.

PLOT SUMMARY

Piranesi lives in the House, and has no memory of having lived anywhere else. In his notebooks, he makes a clear record of its wonders: the labyrinth of halls, the thousands of statues, the tides that thunder up staircases and the clouds that move through the upper halls.

Twice a week, Piranesi sees his friend, the Other. The rest of the time, he brings tributes of food and water lilies to the Dead, a number of skeletons that inhabit the House.

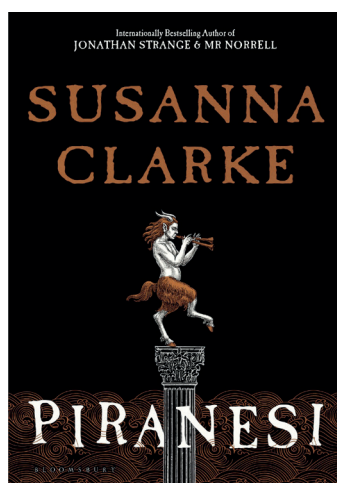
When messages begin to appear in the House, Piranesi learns that he is not alone and there is someone new in the House. But who are they, and what do they want? Are they a friend or do they bring destruction and madness as the Other claims? And what secrets will Piranesi discover about the Other, and the House itself?

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Piranesi was an Italian artist and engraver who, in the 1740s, fell ill during a malaria epidemic and hallucinated visions of prisons. When he recovered, Piranesi created a series of engravings called the *Carceri d'Invenzione*, a series of sixteen prints featuring nightmarish dungeons and prison rooms inside which people are present, though it's not clear as to their motivations or feelings.

In Clarke's *Piranesi*, our main character is similarly trapped

inside a prison, although he doesn't know that he is (and, even when he discovers what the House is, isn't sure that he wants to leave). Whilst there is less dungeon-esque iconography in the novel than in Piranesi's original engravings, Piranesi is nonetheless alone and lives a simple life, eating seaweed and catching fish. Due to the amnesiac effect of being in the House (also a symptom of the artist Piranesi's own malaria), he doesn't remember that he has been tricked into coming, and left there by his jailer, the Other.



The House itself seems to be a kind of vast, grand and labyrinthine museum or gallery, filled with sculpture, which is flooded on the lower floors and, on the upper floors, sometimes filled with cloud. There is a sense that the House may represent the past glories of humanity and their achievements, now left to ruin; The Prophet describes it as a Distributary World, created by ideas flowing out of another world.

Piranesi seems very relevant to the times of Covid, where involuntary imprisonment in our homes has been calm and inspiring for some, and torture for others. We learn that the skeletons in the House are the remains of other prisoners, none of whom have survived in the House as well as Piranesi, who

has learnt to navigate its rooms, and explored further than anyone else. Perhaps this is because Piranesi has kept himself busy in the House, keeping a detailed diary, making offerings to the dead and mapping and exploring the halls, thereby taking an unintentionally mindful approach to his existence.

The Prophet (Laurence Arne-Sayles, a kind of Aleister Crowley-esque figure brainwashing his students into taking part in his magical experiments), has also spent time in prison in the real world, and confesses to having liked it. Yet his prison was a conventional one including human contact, not the House, where Piranesi is completely alone. Which is the worse prison? One where Piranesi can roam at will but never sees another human, apart from the Other on his carefully timed visits, or Arne-Sayles' conventional prison, full of other humans? Is the House a prison, or a kind of infinite sanctuary? Is hell other people?

DISCUSSION POINTS

Clarke presents the reader with a portal fantasy in *Piranesi* (where characters go through a portal of some kind to reach another world), but, unlike standard portal fantasies, there is no great magical fulfilment in the other world - i.e. characters are not gifted magical powers, become kings or heroes, etc.,. Rather, the House is empty and silent, apart from the waves crashing underneath and the occasional flood, and Piranesi is trapped there until he is rescued by Raphael. At the same time, the House lends Piranesi a kind of peace, away from society, that he longs for even when he leaves, as does Raphael.

How does *Piranesi* compare to other portal fantasy stories? (In her foreword, Clarke references C S Lewis' *The Magician's Nephew*, part of the Narnia books, as an example). Are anyone's fantasies fulfilled, or problems solved? What about the Prophet? Has he got what he wanted? How do you feel about the House? How much is the House a fantasy of life without other people, and how many of us could truly survive in such an environment?

QUESTIONS

How do Valentine Ketterley and Raphael compare as characters? Both have been students of Laurence Arne-Sayles, but how do their actions and motivations differ?

Is Arne-Sayles (the Prophet) a villain, a seer, wise man, sociopath, magician, or all of these?

What is the relationship between science, philosophy and magic in *Piranesi*?

When Matthew Rose Sorensen returns home, his disappearance is framed as mental health-related. Is this in some way true? Might other delusional realities still count as realities to the person experiencing them?

NEXT STEPS

Research Piranesi's *Carceri d'Invenzione* engravings online and use one of them to inspire a piece of creative writing,

such as a narrative or prose poem – or perhaps an account of one of the humans experiencing one of the prison rooms. How does your character experience the prison? How do they describe what is around them – are they frightened, bemused, accepting? Do they marvel at their prison and admire it in the same way that *Piranesi* does? Do they undertake daily activities? What are the smells, tastes and textures of the rooms, walkways, the devices that they live with? Why do they think they are there?



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Alternatively, write about how you have experienced quarantine and lockdown. Has it been a fever dream in some ways? Have you felt imprisoned? Or have you felt freer than usual, with a different routine? What have you discovered about yourself over the past year? Have you experienced loss? How do you feel? If you haven't already, you could start a diary, inspired by *Piranesi*, even to record the most mundane of daily activities. Perhaps you will look back on them in years to come and remember your life now.

“**UTTERLY TRANSPORTING. IT SPIRITS YOU AWAY INTO A FASCINATING UNIVERSE THAT STAYS WITH YOU LONG AFTER YOU'VE PUT THE BOOK DOWN.**”

NESRINE MALIK
2021 JUDGE

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

JONATHAN STRANGE & MR NORRELL

by SUSANNA CLARKE

EVERY HEART A DOORWAY by SEANAN MCGUIRE