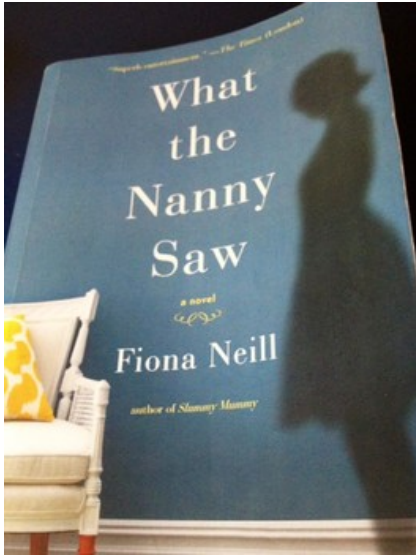


Find out 'What the Nanny Saw'

Amy Wagner



"What the Nanny Saw" is an eminently readable and entertaining new novel from British author Fiona Neill. Her premise is simple: when scandal rocks a wealthy, prominent family, it is a bit player like a nanny who has a birds-eye view of it all. Neill has crafted a sharply observed cautionary tale, that's ripped right from recent headlines.

It's September 2008 and Lehman Brothers has just gone belly up. Ali Sparrow, a student of 18th-century English literature, has postponed her studies for two years in order to finance the rest of her university education with the salary she's earned as a nanny.

In the week since she had moved into Holland Park Crescent, Ali was growing accustomed to the idea of being invisible. . . . In London, there were no familiar faces. She was neither a parent nor part of the group of East European nannies who stood together, laughing and chatting in guttural strange languages in the park. It made Ali realize how much of her identity was formed from her relationship with the familiar.

Eventually, the rarified over-privileged lives of her employers, Nick Skinner, a big player in Lehman Brothers' London office, and his publicist wife Bryony become familiar. The Skinner family -- including Bryony's parents Foy and Tita -- have all been living large.

Ali takes it all in: the biggest house in London's desirable Holland Park Crescent, the summer trips to the family place in Corfu, the exclusive schools for the four Skinner children, the over-the-top holiday party where Elton John comes to serenade the guests. Neill depicts it all with characteristic verve:

How could anyone spend so much money doing up a house? Ali wondered. It wasn't really a moral question, although it should be. Rather, it was logistical. She now understood that a set of curtains for an early Victorian drawing room with two sash windows could cost almost 10,000 pounds, because she had seen the bill from the interior decorator. . . . There was lining, interlining, weights, blackout fabric, passmenterie trimming, walling. When she heard the decorator speak to Bryony, Ali had felt like an anthropologist who had stumbled across a secret language spoken by only a very small British tribe.

In her first week of work, Bryony gives Ali an unwittingly prescient bit of advice:

"Whatever happens to you in life," Bryony said, staring straight out the windshield, "make sure that you always get out your side of the story first, Ali."

Nick is apparently a lone voice in the wind at Lehman, wanting to "get rid of all the liability on our books today," knowing that there's a "big whale-sized tail waiting to sweep us all overboard when the boom slows down." He clearly hasn't been able to convince his corporate "lords and masters" -- including Lehman's Dick Fuld, who Nick's young twin sons think is a Vulcan -- to chart his course.

"They told me I was being overcautious and uncreative," Nick said. We're at the top of the market. I can smell it. And Fuld still wants more risk."

Ali -- and the family -- are shocked when Nick is nabbed for insider trading on the eve of Lehman's collapse. Ali is tempted to tell her story -- to reveal just what she has seen and to get her side out first -- to a Skinner family friend and journalist. She genuinely likes the Skinners. She is captivated by the twins Hector and Alfie; she watches over teen-aged Izzy, who battles an eating disorder; she builds a complicated relationship with Jake, who is but four years her junior.

As the scandal continues to unfold, Ali realizes that the balance of power has truly shifted. In the end, it is Ali, the insignificant nanny, who has the power to save the Skinner family.

"What the Nanny Saw" takes an assured look at the high price of wealth and privilege. Neill's trenchant observations of the ways of the newly-minted super-wealthy are both comic and unexpectedly poignant. Read this book -- and remember that ultimately it's nannies like Ali who get the last word regardless of what they have seen.

"What the Nanny Saw" by Fiona Neill is published by Riverhead Books and is available on amazon.com and at your favorite New York bookstore.