

ABOVE THE SALT [STARRED REVIEW!]

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Review Issue Date: September 15, 2023

Online Publish Date: August 23, 2023

Publisher: *Flatiron Books*

Pages: 432

Price (Hardcover): \$29.99

Publication Date: November 7, 2023

ISBN (Hardcover): 9781250873811

Section: Fiction

Vaz follows star-crossed 19th-century lovers over eight decades and two continents as their personal crises intersect with Portuguese and American history.

Poetic language creates a dreamy, over-the-top atmosphere in which “air sighed like a church organ’s coda” for this sweeping saga of thwarted love overstuffed with characters and events. Over and over, soul mates John Alves and Mary Freitas reunite only to separate. Unlucky timing, world events, and meddling by mean-spirited acquaintances are the main culprits, although the lovers’ impetuous choices also play a role. They first bond as children in 1846 on the Portuguese island of Madeira shortly before local Catholics violently attack Protestant converts; John’s family are converts who must flee, Mary’s father a Catholic whose religious tolerance gets him in trouble. When they next meet in 1860 Illinois, Mary, not yet 21, is engaged to another man. Edward Moore is a wealthy American 10 years Mary’s senior who has employed her to run his greenhouse. While John is the novel’s leading man, a model of rectitude and unwavering passion, Edward is more complicated and therefore more endearing. His sense of privilege and social awkwardness is offset by self-awareness, sensitivity, broadmindedness, and progressive attitudes—for instance, he pays Mary as much as a man. Mary’s passion for John survives dramatic events—phony letters designed to tear them apart, parental disapproval, the mistaken belief he has died—but is never tested by actual daily life together. Edward and Mary push and pull each other in their professional as well as their emotional partnership. While she always adores and idealizes John, Mary underestimates Edward for years. The love triangle plays out against the backdrop of history. The Civil War and the San Francisco earthquake play disruptive roles, and Lincoln is one of many historic figures with whom the characters interact.

Operatic, sometimes soap operatic, and memorably vivid.