Lovereading Reader reviews of Unravelling Oliver by Liz Nugent

Below are the complete reviews, written by Lovereading members.

Linda Hill

* A book worth all the praise gathered by its publicity team. An absolute corker!

Constructed in chapters based on each of the characters, 'Unravelling Oliver' is an incredibly good book. From the opening sentence of ‘I expected more of a reaction the first time I hit her’ to the concluding sentence, this story builds and builds until we are left wondering how we become who we are and what we might have done in Oliver's position.

Initially I expected the structure of a different narrator in each chapter, which is written in the first person, might be unwieldy but it works brilliantly, adding layer upon layer of detail and understanding of Oliver's actions, motives and consequences.

I'm really hoping Liz Nugent will continue the lives of the characters in a follow up as I feel as if I know them all.

https://lindasbookbag.wordpress.com/

Jo-anne Atkinson

* From its stunning first line this story unfolds the life of Oliver Ryan and the truth comes out.
Oliver Ryan is a best-selling author of children's books, affluent and living with his devoted wife, Alice, in comfort in Dublin. One evening Oliver attacks Alice so severely that she is left in a coma. Why did he do it?

This is the premise of 'Unravelling Oliver', not a whodunnit? But a whydunnit? Oliver is a man driven by the secrets and lack of love in his childhood, by poverty in his youth. How did Oliver get to the position he is in now, the life he craved, what did he do to get here?

This is a sparse, short book with a collection of narrators each giving their perspective on Oliver and the events of his life. As the layers peel away like an onion the reader sees more and the final acts show just how far Oliver was prepared to go and the awful price he has had to pay.

The writing is clean and the plot is very clever. In fact my only criticism is that I feel there was one plot device too far and that stands out massively. Yes, it has impact on some motivations but it almost feels like an unnecessary extra. Other than that, this is a superb debut novel.

www.pluckedhighbrow.wordpress.com

Sarah Musk

A dark, absorbing, compelling book with an enigmatic main character. The story starts with an absolutely shocking incident which keeps you hooked all the way through to find out why, why, why.

This is quite a sinister book. It starts with Oliver beating his wife, Alice, and the rest of the book is dedicated to explaining why he did so. The reader feels a palpable sense of unease about Oliver throughout and it is unusual to read a book where one is somewhat scared of the main character.

I really liked the way Liz Nugent gradually built the story up through the years while telling different sides of the story by the participating characters. Everyone has a different viewpoint on Oliver but nobody really knows him. He doesn't really know himself - he is a fraud and a fake. One effect of this is that Oliver is an enigma throughout and the reader is left feeling that you never fully understand his motivations and behavioural problems. He does suffer terrible rejection as a child and it affects his moral compass in his close relationships with people but you are never quite prepared for the terrible rage that is inside him.

I found the book totally absorbing and compelling but I couldn't say I enjoyed it
because Oliver is such a dark character. Nevertheless it is finely written and I would certainly read another Liz Nugent book.

**Linda Benner**

_**Every spare five minutes I had, and some I didn't, I picked up this book.**_

Charming, good looking, confident, Oliver draws people in, discarding them when he tires of them.

This story is told by Oliver himself and the people whose lives he has affected or ruined. The only person who doesn't relate her tale is Oliver's wife Alice, and that is because he has beaten her into a coma.

As the book progresses we learn more and more about Oliver and his sinister and manipulative ways.

The book is **superbly written with believable characters.**

An intelligent insight into the way family and upbringing can shape a person.

**Kerry Bridges**

Oliver and Alice have been happily married for over 20 years; he is a successful children's author and she his illustrator. One day, out of the blue, Oliver beats Alice so badly she falls into a coma. This is the story of how that came to pass.

This book is a fairly thin one and I got through it in a couple of nights. I was very glad to see that the author didn't try to pad it out unnecessarily, as I thought it was a really good story which held my interest and made me want to read on and find out what happened at every stage and I did not see the twist at the end coming although I did realise some of it fairly quickly.

This is quite a hard book to review without giving too much away. I can say that the relationships between Oliver and the other characters are revealed through both his and their eyes and, as a multiple point of view novel, this works perfectly. Although Oliver himself is a thoroughly unpleasant character, I warmed to some of the others very much, particularly Madame Veronique and the French family and others who I didn't like so much were still very integral to the story; it's written so sparsely that you know every character and every event are vital.
All in all, this isn't a crime thriller in the normal sense of the word. I think the description of a "whydunnit" on the cover is most apt and, if you like crime but want to read something a little bit different, this would definitely be one I would recommend.

http://iamalwaysreading.wordpress.com/

Robin Little

A tremendous book that gradually gives up its mysteries.

The story set in Dublin about an enigmatic outsider called Oliver is a real thriller told from the perspectives of those included in the story. The technique of giving the views of those involved means that the main protagonists are richly rounded individuals each of which contributes to the story as a whole.

The book maintains an easy pace which tells the story and lifts the web of intrigue surrounding a house of horror and explains why and how the dreadful events took place. A really well written, but chilling tale.

Anne Rhodes

An incredibly gripping book from the first sentence – a brilliant first novel. It moves forward and backward in time as various people remember the Oliver they knew. Oliver himself very gradually reveals his inner thoughts, his reactions to other people. Your heart goes out to all those influenced by Oliver, as more and more is revealed about him. Nurture versus nature? The 'spoil 'em' brigade? The 'Be firm' brigade? Be prepared for losing several hours - you won’t want to put this book down! You may feel that Oliver should be seen as ‘the bad guy’ but you may equally view him with a great deal of empathy! Start reading immediately and make your choice!

Cathy Petersen

From the first line to last, this dark tale of secrets and lies will keep you gripped until you’ve uncovered all of Oliver’s secrets.

To begin, this has a truly excellent first line that grabs your attention and then just gets better. While you know from the start the violent crime Oliver has committed the skilful ‘unravelling’ of the whys, which go back decades, allows you to gradually become aware of far more than the assault on Alice in Oliver’s past. The use of different points of view from people in Oliver and Alice’s past
works especially well as together with the differing observations of events, each recollection helps the reader piece things together with just enough to keep you hooked and guessing, without ever revealing too much. Each one also enables you to explore how different people perceive the same experiences and reassess them later in light of subsequent events, which is, I think, the novels greatest strength together with Oliver himself, who is charismatic, witty and utterly monstrous. This is a wonderfully compulsive psychological thriller that actually did keep me turning the page to find out what was really behind Oliver beating his wife Alice into a coma. The Loved it.

Twitter: @Cerysthepup

Catherine Jenkins

Fans of ‘Gone Girl’ will find this the perfect remedy from their withdrawal symptoms - and ‘Unravelling Oliver’ even goes one better by presenting the twists and turns of a marriage and its history via a variety of characters who each thought they knew the titular Oliver and his wife Alice. A dark descent into the motivations lying behind a chain of amoral actions, this takes an interesting angle on the nature/nurture debate and how our upbringing informs our later self, whilst also educating the reader on past and present Ireland and post-war France.

Joy Bosworth

Different and snappy bits.

Parts of this book seemed ready to lead into an enjoyable read, but I found the many storytellers really frustrating. A couple of characters seemed to be written as females when actually the thought processes were meant to be male. The idea is good but I think the design is flawed, retold as a straight narrative and it could be much better.

Amanda Keeling

An unputdownable page turner. It will keep you guessing until the end.

I have nothing but praise for this wonderful book. From the first page I was well and truly hooked. What could have possibly made this man react so violently towards his wife? What comes next are the people who lived on the periphery of
Oliver's life telling their stories of him. Each chapter begins to piece his story together, but I did not see what was coming at the end. Brilliantly written and structured, you won't regret giving this book a whirl.

Twitter: @pikalili

Alison Burns

‘Unravelling Oliver’ is that rare type of book, one that is original and is not padded with unnecessary background or description. It is also a great read.

Oliver is a famous author of children’s books which are illustrated by his long term wife Alice. Out of the blue, Oliver savagely beats Alice and she ends up in a coma. As Oliver tells you his back story and the different characters from his life each describe their past involvement with and experiences of him, a complicated picture of a troubled child who grows into a rather unpleasant man begins to evolve. The picture is interesting and engrossing from the outset, with threads you don’t see coming and it was not until quite late on that I twigged what Oliver had been up to. Surprisingly, the story also made me laugh out, so it had pretty much everything going for me as a reader.

I will watch out for more from Liz Nugent and hope future novels will be as engrossing as Unravelling Oliver.

Suzanne Beney

A great concept for a book, unravelling the why rather than the who.

I really liked the concept for this book, however for me it felt a little lacking.

It's really nicely written, but there didn't seem to be enough of the 'unravelling' of the real reasons why the events happened. It left me disappointed and wanting more from the story.

Celeste McCreeesh

Meet Oliver Ryan, a very successful children's book writer who is married to an equally successful woman, Alice who also happens to be the illustrator for his books. From the outside they are the vision of a happy couple but reality is far from it. One day, Oliver hits Alice so badly that she ends up in coma and nobody can understand why he would do that so Oliver tells his story. As the
story moves on we're introduced to many characters along the way who have all either had dealings with Oliver or those paths he has crossed over five decades. What unfolds is a story of shame, envy, breath-taking deception and masterful manipulation.

**I didn't like this book, I LOVED it.** The first chapter was challenging but compelling. **Once I started reading I could not put it down.** I really disliked Oliver from the first page and throughout the book but I could feel my feelings getting softer towards the end for him but you'll have to read it to find out why. This story demonstrates the extent to which childhood experiences and relationships with our parents impact upon the adults we become. Beneath the handsome charming, successful exterior is a toxic manipulative man, who destroys and damages the lives of those who are close to him. It's true what they say none of us knows what goes on behind closed doors.

‘Unravelling Oliver’ is Liz Nugent's first novel and I look forward to reading her next novel.

**Caz Barnett**

"With Oliver, you only get to scratch the surface"

So says Michael, who, with his sister Laura, is one of the strands of Oliver which need to be unwound.

The book opens dramatically and we are shocked at the callous act of Oliver Ryan. As we dig deeper, it becomes clearer, beginning with a lonely childhood and an uncaring father, who ships him off to boarding school. We meet the various characters who have peopled his life and the often tragic ends they came to

"I have managed to kill all the people who have loved me so far"

Alice, who he loved but saw, rather contemptuously, as "useful" and "dreamy" becomes the object of the opening attack, but we eventually understand his reasons.

Oliver is only truly happy once, working on a farm in France, where he becomes attached to a young boy, Jean-Luc and spends an idyllic summer. He finally gets a taste of the genuine affection he has always craved "I deserved a better father. I found one in France but, alas, he was not mine"

Dreading going back to the penniless days of his lonely life in Ireland he plans to endear himself to everybody by being a hero and saving Jean Luc. His plans
meet with tragic consequences and in the end Oliver has finally been unravelled.

This is a beautifully written, intricate and layered book, with well-drawn characters and a satisfying conclusion.

Lynn Curtis

I expected more...

A surprisingly slim volume, and the multi-character narrative voice made the book seem rather bitty. Because Alice has been silenced before the action of the book begins, her take on Oliver is missing and regrettably her character remains unexplored. I’m afraid that for me this didn’t really live up to expectations.

Victoria Halliday

Gripping “why-dunnit”!

‘Unravelling Oliver’, by Liz Nugent, does what it says on the tin - unravels Oliver. Told from multiple different perspectives, the novel starts with Oliver committing a shocking assault on this wife and then throughout the rest of the novel, unpacks why he did it. This is a brilliantly plotted novel that I found impossible to put down, the kind of book you read in one or two sittings. The different perspectives on the story were a really clever way of introducing all of the information which lead Oliver - and Alice - to the terrible assault. A very highly recommended read!

Charlie Pritchard-Williams

This book is the kind of book you don’t want to put down until you’ve finished it though I’m not totally sure if I wanted to finish it because it was riveting or because I just wanted to get it over with really.

I did enjoy it especially at the beginning but it perhaps dragged on a bit.

I thought the character of Oliver was really interesting, I felt so sorry for the poor neglected little boy who never got to go home and spend any time with his family and I was annoyed that Oliver’s father was never confronted by his son.

I thought the different chapters being told by a different character was clever but I enjoyed stitching the story together like one big jigsaw puzzle, though I guess it was an easy jigsaw puzzle.
I guess Oliver redeemed himself by lying to his daughter and allowing her to believe that she wasn’t the offspring of a wife batterer, though I guess one could also say he is also just causing more pain by denying her the truth.

Having said all that, I did enjoy it and I'd definitely be interested in reading another book by Liz Nugent.

You can follow Charlie on Twitter: @charliepw

**Julie Bertschin**

**Addictive reading. Oliver's past catches up with him with devastating consequences.**

The story starts in an explosive fashion with Oliver assaulting his wife as she reveals to him that she knows his secret past. We witness the history of Oliver’s life as the book continues, learning of his cruel abandoning and deprivation and hear other people’s retrospective views on him and their connection with him. This is a very engaging story as we seek to find out what Oliver’s secret is. I found myself wanting to sympathise with him but at the same time despising the evil things he did. I loved this book and really recommend it.

**Bethany Dimmock**

**Captivating psychological thriller that makes an unnerving, yet memorable read.**

At first I was taken aback at how such a short crime novel could be given such rave reviews. It wasn’t until I began reading the book I understood how this was achieved; Nugent writes in a concise and succinct manner, yet still portrays each and every character to their full.

The exceptionally written 231 pages follow Oliver and those who have crossed his path during his lifetime, right from childhood to the fateful day when beats his wife, Alice into a coma.

Nugent begins the story at its close, giving a twist to the ordinary ‘whodunit’ and instead exploring why he did it. This is a true psychological thriller that deals in deception and loneliness and of course the darkness that lingers somewhere in the human mind.

I am tempted to question the claim that this is a crime novel for it is so much more, and for me at least I began to question Nugent’s sinister and manipulative protagonist – could it all have been prevented?
This is ultimately a tale of unrequited love and loss, in so many dimensions, a theme that prevails to the final sentence. I’ll be thinking about the ‘what if’s’ surrounding Oliver’s life for a long while to come.

You can follow Bethany on Twitter: @BethanyAmber94

**Lesley Hart**

*Unputdownable from the opening sentence; Liz Nugent has a great understanding of the psychology that shapes a person, which is reflected throughout this gripping tale.*

Liz Nugent gradually draws the reader into Oliver and Alices’ story - unpicking the shocking events that have shaped Oliver’s personality. This book’s powerful start makes it a gripping read that doesn’t fail to continue the rollercoaster from the first to the last sentences.

‘Unravelling Oliver’ is a fabulous psychological feast and Liz Nugent doesn’t get drawn into unnecessary flowery descriptions which would only serve to lessen the impact of her writing. The matter-of-fact narration given by Oliver throughout gives additional credibility to his story. Liz Nugent has created a powerful and believable series of events which hook the reader from the very first sentence. I would thoroughly recommend this book.

**Fiona Rothery**

‘Unravelling Oliver’ is a very sad story about a child who is disowned by his father and grows up without a secure family life. It starts with Oliver’s thoughts as a man regarding his recent unprovoked brutal attack on his wife. The events leading to this are told throughout the novel by Oliver and people who have featured in his life. It demonstrates how a person’s start in life can colour their personality, influencing the path they take and the effect they have on others. Oliver is not a likeable character although there are times when you certainly feel sorry for him but his outward façade that he shows to the world draws people to him, often with disastrous results.

The novel draws on past and present events and although most are explained I would have liked more background about Oliver’s mother and his father’s reasons for rejecting him.

*I found this novel compelling reading as Oliver’s story unfolds and the different sides of his personality are unravelled.*
Elisabeth Thomas

An amazing read.

Alice and Oliver Ryan seem a normal married couple. Oliver is a successful children’s author whilst Alice illustrates his books. Everything about their lives is perfect or so it seems until Oliver beats Alice into a coma. What has made Oliver turn from a placid husband into this monster that nearly kills his wife?

The book sets out not to discover who did the crime by to find out why Oliver snapped. Which is makes the book a bit different from your average piece of crime. The book charts Oliver’s life from his earliest life at boarding school to his life post the attack on Alice from both his perspective and the perspective of those closest to him which reveals that Oliver is not perhaps all that he seems.

The book was fantastic – the suspense created by the author was great and at the end of each chapter I just wanted to carry on devouring it! The plot took many twists and turns and reached a chilling climax when all of Oliver’s secrets are revealed. I hope Liz Newton has plans for a second novel!

Phylippa Smithson

Quite simply a must read if you like fast paced, engaging thrillers – and this is one nearing the best of the best, way stronger than the likes of ‘Gone Girl’.

A most powerful opening chapter describes Oliver in state of desperation having ruthlessly attacked his wife, Alice, despite this appearing to be wholly out of character. So what has driven Oliver to put his wife into a coma? This is at the heart of the story and the answer is revealed in a most intriguing way - there is good reason by the title of the book is as it is.

Key people in Oliver’s life (from childhood to his self now) are a chapter (in some case a number of chapters) to provide what he brought to their lives over the time he was known to them. Like an interview but delivered as if there is no interviewer. From those he knew as a child when he was banished by his Father to be a fulltime border at a school 5 mins from the family home – he never knew what happened to his mother; friends he knew at university and with whom he spent a summer helping on a vineyard in France; family and friends of Alice who had perceived the marriage to be a happy one, despite the seemingly unlikely pairing – she being plain and quiet, he being confident to the extent of
being arrogant. And of course, Oliver himself.

Liz Nugent sure is a most impressive writer and I can see me selecting from the shelf any book she writes without a moment’s hesitation in the future if this is what she is capable of.