A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS
A MEMOIR BY LADY TRENT #1
by Marie Brennan (Tor, February 2013)

THE SELLING POINT
A refreshing naturalistic look into an fascinating world, A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS has been called “Downton Abbey, but with dragons!” (Tor.com). Brennan uses her extensive knowledge of folklore and anthropology to build a captivating world with a strong voice that will leave readers begging for more. A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS went back for a 3rd hardcover printing only three months after it went on sale. This book was also a #8 Locus bestseller, a Best Books of 2013 pick by NPR and was selected for the Notable Books Reading List by Booklist. It was named a “Most Anticipated Book of Spring 2013” by Publishers Weekly and also a “Best Book of the Month” by Amazon.com. Before joining JABberwocky, she had already authored the Onyx Court series as well as the Doppelgänger duology, which has sold more than 100,000 copies in the US alone.

REVIEWS FOR A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS
“Brennan’s world-building is wonderfully subtle, rendering a familiar land alien with casual details. Fans of fantasy, science, and history will adore this rich and absorbing tale of discovery.”
– Publishers Weekly (Starred Review!)

“Though dragons may not exist in our own world’s history, it is certain that the struggles of women like Trent do, and Brennan captures both with equal elegance in this first volume in the memoirs of Lady Trent.”
– Shelf Awareness (Starred Review!)

“Courageous, intelligent and determined Isabella’s account is colorful, vigorous and absorbing... Brennan’s singular upgrade of a fantasy bromide and revitalizingly different viewpoint.”
– Kirkus

“A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS is the work of a mature writer, confident in voice and execution...[A] mellow and agreeable memoir, an absorbing and entertaining novel, and I want more.”
– Tor.com

“A Natural History of Dragons is a tale historical fiction lovers and fantasy fans alike will adore.”
– RT Book Review

“What’s truly great about this novel is the seamless merging of fantasy themes and incredibly realistic scientific and social details. Come for the dragon adventure — because there’s a lot of it. But stay for characters whose stories feel as real as Marie Curie’s.”
– io9.com

“Ms. Brennan masterfully and evocatively tells this memoir-style tale of one girl’s love of dragons, and her willingness to sacrifice everything to study them.”
– Examiner.com

THE STORY
Set in a Victorian England-like land where proper ladies are well mannered and most certainly do not go running off chasing dragons, Isabella Hendemore has been always fascinated by the natural world. And once she is married to a smart young man named Jacob Camherst who shares her passions, Isabella goes on a trek to the land of Vrystana to study dragons. But Isabella uncovers more than just simple scientific discoveries and becomes embroiled in some very dangerous dragon affairs.

THE FUTURE
The second Lady Trent novel, A Tropic of Serpents, was just released on March 4th, 2014. and was recently listed on “Best Bets for Speculative Fiction” by Kirkus. Two additional books were recently sold to Tor in the US, bringing the total number of books under contract to five, and UK rights for the first three books were recently sold to Titan, with combined advances in the six figures.

SERIES RIGHTS SOLD
UK: Titan
http://awfulagent.com -- updated reviews, bibliography, rights info and more!
AUDIO - Available!
FILM - Available!
Publishers Weekly review:
(Starred review ★)
(Isabella, Lady Trent, is a naturalist and adventurer in a country that more or less resembles 19th-century England, yet fantastical creatures roam, Judaism appears to be the dominant religion, and Europe once had an ancient Egypt-like civilization. Isabella has been obsessed with studying dragons since childhood, but a formal scientific career is off limits to a woman. Instead she marries a man who shares her passion for natural history and convinces him to let her join his expedition to see the wild dragons of Vystrana. Along the way, Isabella solves a mystery and proves her worth as a naturalist. Brennan’s stand-alone novel (unrelated to her Onyx Court series), written as Isabella’s memoir of her youthful adventures, and beautifully illustrated by Todd Lockwood, is saturated with the joy and urgency of discovery and scientific curiosity. Isabella’s life is genuinely complicated by her scientific leanings, yet she perseveres with perfectly period-accurate spirit and awareness of the risks and costs. Brennan’s world-building is wonderfully subtle, rendering a familiar land alien with casual details. Fans of fantasy, science, and history will adore this rich and absorbing tale of discovery.

Shelf Awareness review:
(Starred review ★)
Lady Isabella Trent is known from Scirland to Eriqa as the world’s preeminent dragon naturalist, an unexpected and somewhat unorthodox career for a noble woman of Scirland. But before she became famous for her dragon exploits, she was a young woman thrust into society in search of a husband at her parents’ insistence, sacrificing her love of books and learning in favor of doing what was expected of her. Little could her parents have known she would land one of the most eligible bachelors in Scirland—or that he would entertain her dreams of studying dragons in far-off lands.

A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS is Marie Brennan’s imagined memoir of this fascinating woman and the creatures to which she dedicates her life. Brennan’s skill in developing believable, engaging fantasy steeped in archeological history and folklore is what makes this "memoir" so successful—it is at once as fantastical as it is real. Brennan, writing as Lady Trent, drags readers through lands we have never heard of in search of creatures we have never seen, but never once lets us forget that we are reading about an insecure young woman and new bride, struggling to prove her worth despite her gender and to maintain a ladylike reputation without sacrificing what she loves most. Though dragons may not exist in our own world’s history, it is certain that the struggles of women like Trent do, and Brennan captures both with equal elegance in this first volume in the memoirs of Lady Trent.

Kirkus review:
New Victorian-feminist fantasy and first of a series, from the author of the Onyx Court tales (With Fate Conspire, 2011, etc.).

At a tender age, Isabella, daughter of Sir Daniel Hendemore of Scirland, becomes fascinated by dragons and devotes hours of study to sparklings, tiny flying creatures regarded by most contemporary naturalists as insects. In an age when educating girls in science and philosophy is frowned upon, Isabella finds information hard to come by. Once of age, her father insists she marry; luckily, she finds Jacob Camherst, the son of a rich local baronet, not only handsome and charming, but also passionate about dragons. Jacob is willing to indulge her thirst for knowledge and defy convention—in private. But then Isabella’s talents come to the notice of Lord Hilford, a famous naturalist and explorer, who astonishingly consents to her joining the expedition he’s currently organizing to Vystrana in search of rock-wyrms. Eastern European–flavored Vystrana is cold, damp, mountainous,
primitive and impoverished, and the locals are far from welcoming. Worse, before they even arrive at the remote village where they will sojourn, they’re attacked by a dragon! Since Vystrani dragons aren’t noted for their bellicosity, overjoyed if rather shaken Isabella resolves to investigate. This isn’t the first such attack, the locals reluctantly confide; smugglers operate in the area, and perhaps other nefarious activities occur that the Vystrani refuse to admit. There are clues, however, and nothing daunted, Isabella starts to put them together. Told in the style of a Victorian memoir, courageous, intelligent and determined Isabella’s account is colorful, vigorous and absorbing.

A sort of Victorian why-what-whodunit embellished by Brennan’s singular upgrade of a fantasy bromide and revitalizingly different viewpoint.

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RT Book Reviews review:

Set in a neo-Victorian world, Brennan’s latest is the fictional memoir of Isabella, Lady Trent, a woman known for bringing the speculative myth of dragons into the realm of modern science. If you’ve ever secretly wished dragons were real, this story is for you. An alternate history tale about a woman who conquers her dream in the face of adversity with a supportive, loving man by her side, A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS is a tale historical fiction lovers and fantasy fans alike will adore. Isabella is a heroine readers will root for, and fans of Naomi Novik and Mary Robinette Kowal will especially enjoy this book.

Beginning with her curious youth, Isabella tells the fascinating story of how she goes from a lady trapped by the strict societal pressures of her time to meeting the love of her life, fellow dragon enthusiast Jacob, and embarking on a dangerous journey that will result in Isabella becoming one of the foremost experts on dragon anthropology.

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io9.com Review:

With A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS, Marie Brennan has done something that I didn’t think was possible. She’s written an adventure about dragons in an alternate Victorian world, while also realistically capturing what it’s like to be a young woman who wants to buck convention and devote her life to science.

Brennan has created a Jane Austen-style bildungsroman about the life of a young scientist. With her narrator Isabella, she marries the pragmatic romanticism of Austen’s best characters with the geeky adventurousness of golden age science fiction. Isabella is lucky enough to find an eligible bachelor with a good library, who is as enthusiastic about naturalism as she is. And eventually, he allows her to join him on an expedition to a Russia-like country where wild dragons roam free — and she can study them up close.

What makes this novel a true pleasure is Brennan’s attention to sociological details like how a man and woman would actually navigate such an unconventional relationship. They are under scrutiny from high society, where both of them are going to suffer repercussions when Isabella’s husband brings her along on his research expedition. Brennan is careful to alert us to the fact that her husband will be as shunned and judged as Isabella — this isn’t simply a matter of the plucky heroine standing up to the world. Her husband’s bravery is as important to the story as hers.

We also meet another man on the expedition who is from the lower classes, and his battle for recognition as a scientist is a kind of foil for Isabella’s own. Both must struggle, for different reasons, to be taken seriously by the aristocratic, male scientist club.

But ultimately this isn’t just a tale of science and social class. It’s an adventure in which Isabella discovers her own bravery — and the men come
to rely on her scientific acumen. At first, Isabella is just there to organize the men's notes and draw pictures (the book is beautifully illustrated with Isabella's pictures, created by fantasy artist Todd Lockwood). But over time, she becomes the scientists' most important asset. She crawls around mountainsides looking for dragon dens, and rescues her husband from the deadly ice breath of the dragons.

But the group's expedition becomes mired in both research setbacks and cultural difficulties with the locals. Ultimately, only Isabella is able to make the breakthroughs that carry the researchers forward, and help them discover the secrets of why dragons have suddenly started attacking humans. Along the way, they also make crucial discoveries about the marvelous anatomy of dragons, and solve a political mystery.

Though the novel starts a bit slowly, the adventure heats up once our characters arrive in dragon country and Isabella starts to come into her own. This is the first book in a trilogy, and Brennan isn't afraid to take major risks with beloved characters you might be hoping to have around for a while — and that is a good sign.

What's truly great about this novel is the seamless merging of fantasy themes and incredibly realistic scientific and social details. Come for the dragon adventure — because there's a lot of it. But stay for characters whose stories feel as real as Marie Curie's.

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** Tor.com review:  

“Downton Abbey, But With Dragons!”

I have a confession to make. As a fan of the Onyx Court series, and the intelligent, layered use Brennan made of history there, I’ve been looking forward to reading A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS since I first heard it was to be published. And it didn’t disappoint me in the least* — in fact, I’m already pretty sure it’ll be one of my favourite books of the year.

*As the trail of my small-hours squeeing on Twitter after I finished it will attest.

A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS marks Brennan’s first return to novel-length second-world fantasy since her second book. The intervening years have seen a marked improvement in the quality and complexity of her writing: A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS is the work of a mature writer, confident in voice and execution.

It's voice that makes this book such a treat: the voice of Isabella Camherst, née Hendemore, a woman whose passion for dragons and for natural philosophy begins—as we see—very early in her girlhood, even though it is not precisely a respectable past-time for a woman in Isabella's world.

Brennan seems to have modelled Isabella's homeland on late Georgian/early Victorian England: a place with strongly-defined gender roles, country gentlemen whose families—particularly daughters—are expected to be brought up to manners and an arranged marriage, and where natural philosophy is a respectable hobby for gentlemen of means. The book begins in Isabella's childhood, where her passion for natural history—and for dragons—is born after successfully preserving a dragon-like insect in vinegar. Childhood adventures and misadventures follow swiftly, and very soon Isabella is an adult, married to one Jacob Camherst: a fortunate match, since Camherst shares Isabella’s interests and is willing to share his library. Shortly thereafter, Isabella contrives to arrange for both Jacob and, against all propriety, herself, to join Lord Hilford’s dragon-studying expedition to Vrystana.

Engaging thus far, it's here the novel really takes flight. The tone of a retrospective memoir permits Brennan to balance her youthful protagonist's ignorance and colonial arrogance with more mature reflection on the perspectives of the “backwards” Vrystani villagers around her. Brennan also captures effortlessly the enthusiasm for discovery, along with the long stretches of boredom and difficulty, that attends any scientific endeavour. Isabella’s awe and enthusiasm for dragons are infectious, and the amount of thought Brennan’s put into her worldbuilding is impressive. Only the top layers appear on the page, but it feels solid all the way down. There's depth: anyone looking for the chipboard behind the curtain will find realism instead.
But in addition to impressively well-thought-out worldbuilding and a compelling voice, A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS has bandits, dragons that have mysteriously become far more aggressive than usual, dragon dissections, possibly-supernatural goings-on, and intrigue. You mean, you didn’t think there’d be intrigue? We’re speaking of Marie Brennan, after all.

Isabella’s relationship with her husband matures and deepens, as does her proficiency and ambitions as a dragon naturalist. At the same time, she has to deal with the villagers’ fear that she’s brought down a supernatural curse upon them, for exploring some abandoned ruins nearby. When her investigations reveal a more mundane cause, the local lord invites the naturalising party to stay with him, and Isabella stumbles over the source of the troubles plaguing the dragon-studying expedition....

I enjoyed this book a hell of a lot, but it’s not perfect. Isabella acquires information by stumbling over it a bit too often for plausibility’s sake: the coincidences that move the plot forward are a little too transparently coincidental in the aggregate than they are individually. But if I’m honest, I’d forgive far more flaws than this in order to read about Isabella’s adventures. In fact, for a character this interesting with a voice this engaging? I could forgive almost anything. Luckily for me, there’s not a lot to forgive. A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS is a mellow and agreeable memoir, an absorbing and entertaining novel, and I want more.

Tell me there’s a sequel.

A final note on the illustrations: Todd Lockwood has done a brilliant job with the book’s handful of beautiful and utterly appropriate images. They’re well worth staring at in full size.

**Dallas News review:**

Isabella, Lady Trent, is a renowned “dragon naturalist” who, late in life, has been persuaded to write “a series of memoirs chronicling the more interesting portions of my life,” including the expeditions that took her from the swamps of Mouleen to the inhospitable heights of the Mrtyahaima peaks, “the only place on earth where the secrets of dragonkind could be unlocked.”

Her voice seems somewhat Victorian, but while place names like Linshire and Falchester sound vaguely British, you won’t find them on any map of England. In fact, you won’t find England anywhere in Marie Brennan’s A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS (which takes its name from a scientific volume that spurs young Isabella’s passion for the subject).

Gradually, Brennan provides a few clues about the novel’s world. For example, Lady Trent begins publishing her memoirs in the year 5658. If you check the Hebrew calendar, you’ll find that date aligns with 1897-98. It’s never spelled out fully — because Lady Trent takes her history for granted, there’s no reason for her to call attention to the ways it deviates from our own — but in this world, Christianity appears to have never broken away from Judaism, if it ever flourished at all.

The other major difference between Lady Trent’s world and ours, of course, is the existence of dragons, and whenever they’re on the scene, Brennan’s story truly (you should pardon the expression) takes flight. Whether it’s a recollection of a youthful Isabella disguising herself as a boy so she can sneak along on a hunting party near her father’s estate, or Lady Trent’s first examination of a dragon corpse in the mountains of Vystrana (an Eastern European analogue), these passages convey her enthusiasm and curiosity vividly, and you can’t help but get caught up in the discoveries she’s making. (Several illustrations by Todd Lockwood help to clarify our mental images of the beasts she’s describing.)

Other aspects of the story, however, don’t resonate quite as fully. In the early chapters, Brennan sets up a romantic dilemma for Isabella: To land a husband, she needs to set aside her decidedly unladylike interests; her sympathetic father, however, is able to identify a few potential suitors who might share her enthusiasm.

As a Jane Austen pastiche, it’s fairly straightforward, but it lacks the verve of genuine Austen. Perhaps, though, we could make a slight allowance here; young Isabella might be an Austenian heroine, but the more mature Lady
Trent who’s recounting the story comes from a slightly different era.

Once Isabella weds, she’s able to engage in some scientific research around the home. Then she meets a famous explorer who’s mounting an expedition to Vystrana; she hits upon the idea of securing her husband a place on his team — then realizes she wants to accompany them as well. Brennan’s portrayal of Isabella as an early feminist is so obvious that her success in following her passions is expected rather than exciting. She’s a much more engaging character when she’s forced to confront the limitations of her attitude, such as her assumptions of cultural superiority over the villagers with whom the expedition lodged while searching for dragons.

As Lady Trent draws the account of her profoundly life-changing experiences in Vystrana to a close, Brennan lays the foundation for a sequel set in another remote part of the world (Southeast Asia, by the sound of it). That story should be worth looking forward to, with a whole new species of dragons to discover — and, too, maybe then we’ll actually learn how she became Lady Trent.

**SFF Book Review:**

Will you look at that cover! 2013 is not yet here but I am fairly certain it will remain my favorite cover of the year. The artist, Todd Lockwood, is responsible for this gorgeous image as well as the beautiful illustrations inside the book. Thankfully, the beautiful cover/bad book curse did not follow me to the end of the year and the story inside lives up to what its wrapping promises.

Isabella, Lady Trent, is recording her memoirs in this and — if her promise holds true — succeeding volumes. We enter her life as seven-year-old Isabella wants to know why all birds have wishbones, and promptly chops up a dead pigeon to find out. This charming, if very improper, little girl is easy to sympathise with and her struggles to rise above what society has planned for her sex are all too understandable. Isabella’s childhood is defined by her passion for dragons and even though her family do their very best to raise her into a proper lady, she never loses her love for dragon studies. When her husband agrees to take her on an expedition to the Vystrani mountains, Isabella will uncover far more than dragon anatomy…

Marie Brennan captured my interest with her whimsical voice. Set in Scirland (which I read as an analogue to Victorian England) and Vystrana, society forces a set of rules upon our heroine that stand in the way of what she loves. I always enjoy reading about scholars and scientists, about how they experiment and research and try to prove or disprove their own theses. And there is a good amount of studying dragons in this book. But there is also a mystery at the heart of it, conspiracies to be unraveled, and a somewhat larger-than-regular life to be lead. Isabella’s tale may not have been as adventurous and exciting as she leads us to believe in the first chapter but it was a fun journey nonetheless.

I felt the beginning of this book was much stronger than the time spent in Vystrana. While quick-paced, the second half of the novel could have been tightened even more. Since we spend so much time getting to know the humans Isabella meets, and rather little time interacting with actual dragons, I would have welcomed a bit more world-building. All we really learn of Dustanev, that Vystrani city, is that it’s on a mountain, that it’s cold there, and that its inhabitants speak in a Slavic sounding tongue. It was enough to build atmosphere and served for the story told here, but in order for me to understand the complexity of its politics, a little more explanation would be in order.

I cannot write a review without mentioning the stunning cover art and illustrations throughout the book by Todd Lockwood. It fits the tone and theme of the novel perfectly, showing not only dragons in cool poses, but using a pseudo-scientific approach. The cover is by far my favorite but the illustrations inside the novel are equally as beautiful — and the reason why I will buy a hardback paper copy of this book once it’s published. A book this beautiful will make you happy just sitting on your shelf, and if your taste is anything like mine, it will make you happy reading it as well.

**THE GOOD:** Whimsical language, funny remarks by the narrator, and a love for science and dragons that touches the reader as much as the heroine.
THE BAD: Some pacing problems in the middle part, could have used more thorough world-building.

BONUS: Stunning illustrations that make it worth buying (even if you don’t like the story)

THE VERDICT: Recommended to people who liked Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell or the Parasol Protectorate. And dragons, of course.

MY RATING: 7/10 Very good

The Ranting Dragon review:
When I first got my hands on A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS: A MEMOIR BY LADY TRENT by Marie Brennan, I expected a book brimful of, well, dragons. Instead, the focus was on the “memoire” part of the title. Fortunately, I didn’t mind at all. Brennan’s latest work, first in a planned series, offers the rich and engaging story of a thoroughly believable character dealing with the problems and mysteries of a unique fantasy world with marvelous parallels of Victorian Europe.

Lady Isabella Camherst
That doesn’t mean that there aren’t any dragons. There are plenty of them; and our protagonist, Lady Isabella, has loved them for as long as she remembers. Her only problem is that she is a Scirlandian noblewoman and, as such, is not expected to be interested in science. Fortunately, she marries Jacob Camherst, a young baronet whose only interest seems to be science. Through the uncompromising narration of an older Isabella, A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS is the story of the misadventures of her first scientific expedition.

From there on, this memoir takes an unexpected but realistic turn. Isabella’s love of dragons seeps through the pages from her early childhood—when she collected sparklings, little animals that seem to be a cross between butterflies and dragons—through her painful adventures with a dangerous wolfdrake when she was fourteen, to her expedition to the cold mountains of Vystrana to study the indigenous rock-wyrms. Yet, hardly anything is known about dragons in Isabella’s time, and they are both dangerous and difficult to reach. Because of that, A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS doesn’t focus so much on the dragons themselves as on the humans’ often futile attempts to learn more about them. All of this is laden with a riveting dose of mystery when it turns out that the dragons are attacking humans, something they don’t usually do. Isabella takes it upon herself to find out why.

Realistic characters
Through its realism, A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS isn’t simply another book about dragons, but an honest and utterly natural exploration of science and the endeavor of normal people to come to deeper insights. Its absorbing voice can be either clinical or emotional, to suit the moment. Lady Isabella is a thoroughly flawed and gratingly self-important and haughty woman who, in her hunt for both dragons and academic recognition, displays a fallacious worldview that goes through significant development throughout the story. She is astutely self-aware, however, and not above admitting she’s wrong when she realizes it. Her voice is rich and humorous, and sparkles with wit and spirit. Brennan’s narration, through Isabella, is gorgeously skillful and grounded in the vivid details of the dragons, the people, and the world around them. Through the comprehensive scientific observations as well as the stunningly beautiful and very well-placed illustrations by Todd Lockwood, I almost started to believe dragons truly exist.

A Victorian world
The world, too, is enthralling and vividly detailed. While this story is obviously narrated to an audience living in and familiar with this world, A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS gives exactly the right amount of information. The biggest strength of Brennan’s world is its astounding balance between the obviously Victorian English elements and the unique and original fantasy spin given to it. Through hints dropped here and there, it becomes apparent that there is a lot more to this world than meets the eye—both in the world itself and in its history—and I look forward to exploring other parts of it in future installments in the series.

The problems A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS and the people therein face in their world are realistically rooted in our own world as well, while still feeling original and actually giving meat to the story. The Scirlandians are educated
and cultured, and they believe themselves above the heathen peasants of backwater mountain villages. Throughout the book, they have to learn to treat these people as human beings just like themselves, and to deal with their elitist mindsets before it means the end of their expedition. Another question asked throughout the story is whether it is right to kill a dragon for scientific purposes, or even as a trophy.

More women, please!
Unfortunately, while Lady Isabella is a wonderfully written and incredibly strong female character, possibly one of the best I’ve ever encountered in fantasy, she seems to be the only one in her world. The other members of her expedition—all of them male—are equally well-written and interesting to read about, especially from the perspective of Isabella herself. All other women in A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS, however, seem to range from annoyingly stubborn and headstrong to plain and shallow gossipers. In a novel so strongly built around a strong female lead and her believable and often touching adventures, the absence of other interesting women is a huge shortcoming.

Why should you read this book?
If you are looking for a book filled with dragons, A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS may not actually be the right book. It is, however, an honest, fascinating, and absorbingly touching story of genuine human beings and the pursuit of science at all cost. If you are looking for a grown-up version of How to Train Your Dragon, with some Jane Austen mixed in, I would definitely suggest picking up A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS. It is an extraordinarily well-written and tremendously gripping tale filled with mystery, humor, discovery, and originality.

Far Beyond Reality Review:
Marie Brennan’s A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS is presented as the (fictional) memoir of Isabella, Lady Trent, who is the world’s preeminent authority on dragons. In these pages, Lady Trent looks back on her early life and career from the vantage point of the experience and maturity she has gained over the years.

Isabella’s family expects her to pursue the life and hobbies of a typical girl in Scirland’s landed gentry—sketching, maybe the piano, definitely a well-to-do husband from an appropriate family. Instead she finds herself drawn to such unladylike hobbies as building a collection of the tiny insect-like dragons known as scarlings.

The self-professed “ink-nosed” girl (love that term) doesn’t read romances and adventures, instead raiding her father’s private library for books about natural history. Filled with an indomitable curiosity about all things scientific (but dragons in particular), she wants to lead “the intellectual life of a gentleman” in a time when women are expected to stick to their households, child-rearing and idle gossip.

What struck me most about A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS is the impeccable execution of Marie Brennan’s concept. Isabella is a Jane Austen-era character who is constrained by the expectations of her time but fights her way out of them by the sheer strength of her personality. As a character, she is enjoyable to read and easy to sympathize with, but to be fair, not exactly original, despite what her husband calls her “deranged practicality.” Consequently, the novel’s direction is often not hard to predict, and the pacing is uneven, with some sections that are unfortunately just plain slow.

However, Brennan is so spot-on in the way she creates Isabella’s voice that I couldn’t help but enjoy A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS. The prose is tuned perfectly to the sense and sensibility (see what I did there?) of a Regency-era novel of manners. The characters and plot developments and dialogues are pitch-perfect. I can’t tell you how much I admire an author who sets out to write a novel that so evidently mirrors a real world historical genre and actually gets it right—warts and all.

One of the novel’s most interesting and surprising aspects is its setting. Before reading, I somehow assumed this was an alt-history world in which place names are different and dragons exist but things are otherwise mostly like our own early 18th Century. The way Brennan emulates the literary forms of that period reinforced this. I sort of assumed “Scirland equals England” and that was that. However, it gradually becomes more and more clear that there’s much more going on: the novel is really set in a secondary world with its own history and mythology and... well, you’ll see.
Another gorgeous touch: A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS features several interior illustrations by Todd Lockwood. These are, just like the novel, impeccably executed as period-appropriate pieces, from a formal portrait of one of the characters to several of Isabella’s scientific sketches. Tor’s art department really knocked it out of the park with this one.

Also nifty: early on, Lady Trent mentions a possible conflict with her editor. She expects him to complain about a passage she’s writing, but plans to “make him leave it in.” She makes it clear that she’s writing “in her own words” for the first time. She even derisively mentions some of her own earlier works as romanticized travel writing. This meta-fictional playfulness makes her feel something like a reverse (and thankfully much less verbose) Paarfi of Roundwood. This is a Good Thing, in my book.

A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS is simply delightful—not a term I apply to literature very often, but the novel is just so well-executed and clever that I always had fun reading it, even during several stretches where I wanted the plot to move along at a more sprightly pace. I’m not sure why I lost track of Marie Brennan after reading her debut Midnight Never Come several years ago, but I’m glad I picked up the thread again. I look forward to The Tropic of Serpents, the second part of Lady Trent’s memoirs, due out in March from Tor.

Geek Exchange review:
In Scirland (England) a young Isabella is fascinated at an early age by Sparklings, tiny dragon-like creatures as common as birds, eventually preserving one in a jar of vinegar. This ignites a passion within her and sets her on a path of scientific exploration. A favored book is A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS, purchased by her father for his library, read over and over again throughout her childhood. Like our own Victorian era at the end of the 1800s, women faced a far more limited existence in society, confined to a regimented social life, and such curiosity is actively discouraged, a major factor that frustrates Isabella throughout the novel.

As a child, her interest with a visit by a drake on her family’s property which brings her face to face with one of the beasts. She grows out of her obsessive streak for years after her encounter, but eventually meets and marries Jacob, a man of some status, and their shared interest rekindles her curiosity. Her father, during the vetting process, ensured that her suitors were in possession of a library of their own, and as a bonus, Jacob happens to own a copy of A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS. Isabella and Jacob, a somewhat happily married couple, are unconventional for their time: she’s strong willed, while he tries to keep up. Shortly after their marriage, they meet a notable explorer and citizen-scientist Lord Hilford and are invited along on an expedition to Vystrana (really, the Balkans or somewhere nearby in Eastern Europe), where they’re to study the dragons of the region. There, they find a bit more than they’re expecting.

A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS is an interesting book with a lopsided structure that will undoubtedly smooth out if another adventure is written about Lady Trent. There’s clearly an episodic nature here, and it’s frustrating at points to see references to other, untold adventures, where there’s clearly the intention to write more later, rather than simply allowing the book to rest on its obvious strengths. The story also has less to do with dragons than I anticipated going into this read: while they’re a central focus of the plot, they’re seen only sparingly, while during the second half of the novel, a subplot with smugglers and local politics is the main driver of the story.

Setting the novel up as a fictional memoir out of the Victorian era is an interesting choice. Steampunk has been an immensely popular subgenre of late, and while this doesn’t have any overt steampunk features, it’s a good example of fiction looking back into the past for inspiration. It’s a particularly well-timed novel, as it features a female protagonist who’s cutting against the cultural grain in a time where women were expected to hold to a certain model. Reading this as the Violence Against Women Act was renewed by the United States Congress is a pertinent reminder that the role women play in speculative fiction is a highly relevant one, and it’s fantastic to read a story led by the strong-willed Isabella, who’s armed with her wits and intelligence to both conduct research and solve a mystery. A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS harkens back to the era of Science Romances, science fiction written during a time when there was much
unknown about the world, before blank points on the maps had been filled. It lends much to the style of stories from Jules Verne and Arthur Conan Doyle, with a real modern sensibility. While the story is ostensibly a fantasy, it has the heart of a science fiction novel, in the spirit of exploration and scientific endeavor.

Finally, an added element to A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS is the artwork. Drawn up by Todd Lockwood, who’s known for his distinctive dragons, this novel has one of the more striking covers to grace the front of a novel in recent years. In addition to that, there are a number of illustrations throughout the book’s pages, presumably drawn by Lady Trent. It’s an added touch to the story and the entire packaged product. In my opinion, the cover alone makes the price of admission worth it.

A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS is at its heart, a nostalgic book: there’s adventure to be had, with a cast of characters out to find adventure and knowledge at all ends of the Earth. It reminds me much of such stories as Jules Verne’s Journey to the Center of the Earth and Arthur Conan Doyle’s The Lost World, where science and exploration were the central focus and it’s a good viewpoint to have. At the end of the day, Brennan’s novel is a fun read, and I’m hopeful that more adventures of Lady Trent are forthcoming.

Examiner.com review:
Marie Brennan is a former academic with a background in archaeology, anthropology, and folklore, which she now puts to rather cockeyed use in writing fantasy. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. In addition to many short stories and novellas, she is also the author of A Star Shall Fall and With Fate Conspire (both from Tor Books), as well as Warrior, Witch, Midnight Never Come, In Ashes Lie, and Lies and Prophecy. You can find her online at SwanTower.com.

Marie Brennan introduces an enchanting new world in A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS. A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS brings the Victorian era to life with stunning details and such lifelike depictions that the reader will truly feel like they are on an expedition to study dragons. From the very beginning, when Isabella was just a child and fascinated with sparklings, the majesty and mystery of dragons shrouds every page. Though mystical, magical creatures to the reader, Ms Brennan brings them to startling life with each tiny detail revealed.

Isabella is no shrinking violet, and her rather madcap adventures grow from the natural curiosity of a child to mould her into the Darwin of dragons. Ms Brennan masterfully and evocatively tells this memoir-style tale of one girl’s love of dragons, and her willingness to sacrifice everything to study them.

SF Signal Review:
“Our Favorite SF/F/H Consumed in 2013”

“Best” is always so difficult to define. My offering is going to be the book that I keep telling everyone to read, because it hit all of the buttons that make me happy. Marie Brennan’s A Natural History of Dragons felt like it was written specifically for me. It’s got a swashbuckling adventure, a young lady of quality as the main character, with dresses and tea and dragons. It has the sense of a mid-nineteenth century travel memoir but set in a secondary world fantasy. I adored it.

Strange Horizons review:
Yes, we shot a dragon.

Reader, if you’ve ever read Jane Eyre you’ll have some idea of the famous line Marie Brennan is riffing on in the above quoted passage (said passage occurring on page 145, midway through her accomplished new novel A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS). "Reader, I married him"—the words which encapsulate everything Jane has fought for in Charlotte Brontë’s novel—are exactly what A NATURAL HISTORY inverts, taking the motif of self-realization though good marriage found in so much of Victorian-era literature, and transforming it, quite delightfully, into self-actualization through dragons. In Brennan’s world dragons (and the quest to understand them) are the longed-for love object and, thus, I can think of no line more representative of the novel’s wit, nor its lack of sentiment, than the above. The purported memoir
of famed dragon-expert Lady Trent, a woman born to the repressive, quasi-Victorian sensibilities of the imaginary land of Scirland, A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS owes less to Jane Eyre-style Romanticism and more Brontë-style politics—and it arrives in time to remind those of us wearied by the din of the "Mommy Wars" that feminism is more than a buzzword to kindle online conflagration.

Ah yes. Feminism. It's a shame that the word has proved distasteful—worse: commercially unappealing!—in some circles; nevertheless, I shall use it. A NATURAL HISTORY is informed by the struggles of first-wave feminists, its Victorian-era setting recalling the circumstances that led to the rise of suffrage. Our Lady Trent (at this point only Mrs. Isabella Camherst; we'll learn how she got her title in forthcoming volumes) chafes at the societal impositions that prevent women from studying the natural sciences, and rebels at the notion that a girl must be romantic when her only true love is of the leathery winged variety. Raised to the privileged class of Scirland, Isabella is expected to marry well and keep quiet, but as her collection of dragon specimens mounts and her interest in Draconian origins grows she realizes that she will never be content in her prescribed role. Beginning in girlhood, she embarks on a series of increasingly dangerous and (for her world) gender-identity-defying exploits that culminates in a research mission to the mountainous land of Drustanev to search, as it were, for the origin of species.

Unsurprisingly, the dragons of the novel's title take a page from Darwin—illustrating the many variations that arise from a common ancestor. The specimens here range from tiny, insect-like "Sparklings," to toxic fume expelling swamp-wyrms, to fire and ice breathers and even a flightless variety with merely vestigial wings. If none have quite the personality of preceding literary wyrms like Tolkien's Smaug or Martin's various Targaryen steeds, it's because Brennan treats them firmly as a scientific, rather than supernatural, phenomenon, complete with passages detailing their dissection, their place in cultural anthropology, and, as mentioned, their death in the name of scientific research. Isabella's narration may derive from the Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell school of historical fantasy, full of self-deprecation and dry, Austenish wit ("If you do not understand what my husband has called my deranged practicality, very little of my life will make the slightest bit of sense," Isabella warns us early on [p. 27]), but both she and Brennan are deadly serious in their respective pursuits. Indeed, it's the novel's analytical tone, its de-emphasis of Romanticism (while tackling a decidedly Romantic subject) that makes it unique.

You know that indignant-with-outrage, hell-hath-no-fury, torrid Catherine Linton type of heroine? (In all seriousness, Reader, I hope you do. The world is a poorer place without her.) Brennan has something more pragmatic in mind. Depending on how hot you like your heroines (I refer here to temperament, not physical beauty), you'll be pleased or puzzled with the ever-practical Isabella, who admits "I am a scientist, and not a Poet" and, while never coming off as cold, is most defiant of stereotypes when un-defiant. Hers is not a fiery rebellion—her original idea regarding the Drustanev expedition is to encourage her husband, Jacob, to go—but a calculated revolt that heeds the strictures of her time. When her place in the expedition is finally assured, Jacob's gentle insistence that they both remain outwardly "well behaved" until departure comes off not as condescending, but as wise—and Isabella heeds him in the name of societal self-preservation. While determined to live life on her own terms, she remains a product of Victorian/Scirlandian conditioning—self-consciously aware of the bounds of propriety even as she transgresses against them. As a result of this characterization, some of her keenest observations are reserved not for dragons, but for members of her own species.

"Mr. Wilker was not a gentleman by birth," Isabella muses in the middle of a fight with a colleague.

And in those days I did not understand what effort had been required for him to lift himself above his humble birth, obtain an education, and bring himself into the circle of a man as socially and scientifically exalted as [our expedition's leader] Lord Hilford. I therefore did not understand why he should resent me, and my presence on this expedition. But the blame must be shared equally; neither of us behaved very well towards each other, as I was in the process of proving. (p. 247)

Take, for example, this exchange, between Isabella and her Drustanev maid, Dagmira. Isabella has asked how she might make amends
to Dagmira's village as the presence of the dragon-expedition has created some rather sensational disruptions involving not only dragons but ancient demons and smugglers.

Finally Dagmira said bluntly, "Get rid of the dragons."

"Get rid of them!" I shot to my feet, appalled.

She flung one impatient hand at the sky. "They eat our sheep, attack our shepherds—what good do they do us?"

All my childhood obsession with dragons welled up in my throat, choking me. "But they're—they're"—I was not capable of having this conversation in [Dagmira's native language], where my vocabulary lacked the word for "magnificent." Perhaps it was for the best; the struggle to convey my meaning gave my brain time to catch up. Beauty and splendor are all very well, but they put no food on the table for a mountain peasant, nor do they keep the house warm in winter.

But I could hardly commit myself to their eradication either. (p. 214)

The tension between species preservationists and native human populations is, of course, nothing new, but Isabella's quandary may strike more of a nerve nowadays as the Internet allows us to keep track of which creatures are going, or have gone, extinct (yesterday it was Africa's Western Black Rhino). This passage might speak to any number of real-world parallels. It also illustrates perhaps the most interesting aspect of the novel: the way in which Isabella remains unashamedly a creature of her class. Her wealth and privilege make her an outsider in Drustanev and limit her ability to truly understand the native culture, but, while acknowledging this, she has no time for anguished hand-wringing—only clear-eyed observation and a tolerable level of compromise. With such different agendas and experiences between them, the most Isabella and Dagmira can be are wary allies—a refreshing, not to mention historically accurate, perspective for a story set at the height of Imperialism. Brennan's narrative is brave enough to admit to its heroine's prejudices and, by so doing, invites us to follow her evolution over the course of the proposed next chapters in her saga.

It's a saga, Reader, that I'll happily follow, containing enough madcap adventure (Draconian ruins! Secret smuggling cabals! Mysterious dragon burial grounds!) to satisfy the armchair explorer and enough research to ground its engaging alternate history. The clever conceit of dragons as a field of study is underpinned by thorough research into Victorian methodology—descriptions of preservation jars, on-the-fly dissection, field journals, scientific publications, and Latin classifications all ring true—and are given a further shade of authenticity by the sporadic inclusion of Isabella's field sketches (in reality, the work of artist Todd Lockwood) which depict various specimens and locales. Brennan's website mentions research into Victorian travel writing, and if you've ever engaged with such, Reader, you will appreciate her facility with the form, which she knows well enough to wax meta-fictional:

I've written before about Drustanev, in A Journey to the Mountains of Vystranna. If you happen to own a copy though, or are intending to buy one (as I've encouraged before), I beg you not to pay any attention to what I said there concerning the village or indeed the Vystrani people as a whole.

The words I wrote then embarrass me heartily now. . . . It is a worse piece of drivel than Mr. Condalle's Wanderings in Central Anthiope, inspired more by the theatrical convention of colorful, semiprophetic Vystrani characters than by the people I knew in Drustanev. (p. 110)

And here, at last, Reader, we must come to a few flaws. Not that Brennan ever treats her characters in the dismissive way of ethnic clichés, but that, perhaps she might have used a little "colorfulness" overall. Drustanev peasant and Scirlandian noble alike, two weeks after finishing the novel I find I can recall few of the supporting characters with any detail. As there are so many of them—childhood friends, society darlings, suspicious village priests, mountain guides—this puts a faint damper on the proceedings. I've forgotten, for example, the names of Brennan's villains. There were two: their deeds heinous, their personalities vague. A subplot involving a missing proprietor named Grietelkin is likewise, important, but has little impact on the reader's emotions. Other than Isabella, Dagmira and Jacob are the only characters to really come into focus and,
while they are more than well drawn enough to earn a few tears when tragedy strikes, the rest of the (quite numerous) cast might have benefitted from a few more descriptive details or exaggerated personality traits. Too many of them remain polite and correct—Jane Bennets when we could have used a few Lady Catherines or Mr. Collinses.

On the whole, however, these are minor flaws pitted against what Brennan has accomplished. Her heroine is an engaging one, whose sure and distinctive voice is more than powerful enough to guide us on her adventures. Her dragons are a suitable combination of the majestic and frightening, inspiring the same sort of respect in the reader that Isabella feels as she begins to map their habits. This is, in the end, a kind of Romance—between a young woman and the entirety of dragon-kind. As the plot thickens in forthcoming volumes I’ll be eager to see how it all evolves.

Blog Critics review:
The atmosphere is a blend of Downton Abbey, Pern and A Series of Unfortunate Events. The eclectic mixture works and it’s easy to imagine dragon boffinry and petticoats being discussed at a high society dinner in Scirling.

Todd Lockwood’s beautiful illustrations are peppered throughout the book and are a real treat to dragon enthusiasts. And as Isabella’s journey takes her to Vystrana in the role of an illustrator, they support the story beautifully, too.

A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS treats the common fantasy trope of dragons in a unique way — and that’s quite an achievement in itself. You find yourself wishing that it would be possible to attend Lady Trent’s lectures and listen to her stories in person.

Isabella comes across as a strange mixture of one of Anne McCaffrey’s strong female characters and the clumsy Bella from Twilight. One of the most engaging elements of the fictitious author is her determination to succeed in a field that, in her world, is strictly off limits to women.

The only problem with this novel (apart from the parentheses) is the difficulty with the fictional memoir format itself. The reader is constantly jolted back from the younger Isabella’ thoughts when the older Isabella feels the need to butt in and explain something. Furthermore, being only in Isabella’s head prevents the reader from really getting much more than a passing glance of the other potentially interesting characters.

Nevertheless, the endearing geekery of the narrator, the mystery element to the story and the occasional glimpses of dragons keep you hooked enough. It’s an enjoyable read and I would particularly recommend it to teenagers who, besides enjoying the story, might even be inspired enough to take up natural sciences. This book could have been called “How to Dissect Your Dragon.”

Fantasy Faction review:
A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS is exactly what it sounds like. A memoir written by a Victorian naturalist who has an obsession with dragons and embarks on an adventure to be one of the first to study them. What follows is a half travelogue, half whodunnit book that was fun every step of the way.

What drew me to this book, more than anything else, was the absolutely gorgeous cover illustration done by Todd Lockwood. I know they say don’t judge a book by its cover and while certainly that holds true, I couldn’t help myself. It captured my imagination and curiosity more so than a fair amount of the others on the bookshelf these days and the interior illustrations, also done by Todd Lockwood, are just as stunning.

Lady Isabella Trent is a wonderfully charming female-lead who is willing to break from the gender roles of the era and do as her heart desires, study dragons. Her maneuverings through the gender-roles that are inherent in a Victorian-era setting are fun and help a reader to bond quickly to the driven nature of Lady Trent, making her more likable as a person.

Marie Brennan does an incredible job of writing in multiple voices concurrently. What I mean by this is strewn throughout the novel, the present-day Lady Trent, who is recounting her story into a memoir, offers a colorful bit of commentary on the present situation. Brennan expertly maintains the
balance that makes this commentary fun and informative, without pulling you from the actual story. It’s a brilliant touch that brings a level of authenticity to the memoir-style.

Personally, I never believed I could want additional illustrations in the books I read. I always feared it would detract from the story, inhibit my imagination, and all around be a bad idea. Much like in Brandon Sanderson’s *The Way of Kings*, which had gorgeous artwork, Marie Brennan and the artist Todd Lockwood prove me wrong by offering stunningly detailed and beautiful art scattered throughout the book. I would find myself pausing my reading, or going back after finishing the chapter, and studying the illustrations. It was as if Todd Lockwood had managed to reach inside my brain and draw with my imagination instead of a brush.

Lady Isabella Trent is famous in her world for her naturalist studies and the contributions she’s made to the scholar community in relation to dragons. Her adventures were many and are hinted at repeatedly through the novel. I’m excited to see what strange lands she visits next and new breeds of dragons wait for her there.

**Fantasy Book Critic review:**

A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS—released on February 5, 2013 by Tor—is the first of a new series by Marie Brennan. Her previous books include the *Doppelganger* series beginning with *Warrior*, and the Elizabethan fantasy *Onyx Court* series beginning with *Midnight Never Come*. You can read more about Marie Brennan on her website here: http://swantower.com/. I admit, I’ve had some trouble getting into her novels before, but this one hooked me right from the get-go.

I think what really got me was the voice: the narrator, Lady Isabella Trent, is an old lady with no fear of censorship; a lady who has become renowned as a dragon naturalist and has decided to write her memoir; a lady who isn’t afraid to write anecdotes and opinions that might scandalize others, because the scientist in her believes that an honest, open, and detailed account is of utmost importance. There’s a wonderful blend of clinical and emotional observations about her world, her life, and herself.

The story is set mostly in analogs of England and Russia, with references to Italy, Germany, and countries in Africa. It’s essentially Victorian, but with dragons. Structurally, the book uses Victorian chapter titles that manage to summarize the events of a chapter without giving very much of import away before you read it.

I loved the inclusion of sketches of dragons and various other places and people of import (so mostly dragons, because they are what is most important to the character), especially with the implication that the narrator has drawn these sketches herself. There weren’t all that many, but they were well-placed.

Brennan writes with an academic's understanding of the world of academia, and her background in anthropology served her well not just in world-building, but also in understanding her narrator's interaction with the past and current worlds. She gets away with a lot of exposition by having her older narrator explain how societal standards and her perception of world differ from those of her younger self. The narrator also periodically references written works in other Victorian styles with varying degrees of approval and chagrin (mostly chagrin, even for her own).

While I loved the older Lady Trent's perspective, as she began her story I also immediately identified with her younger self, the little girl collecting bugs, though that will be different for everyone. The common feature, though, is that as a child she had hobbies that were not what society considered normal or recommended, and that is a more universal experience.

As a lady of her time, Lady Trent did not simply resolve as a child that she was going to buck society and become a heroic naturalist no matter what anyone thought. That would have smacked uncomfortably Mary-Sue-like for my taste, but it's nothing so grandiose; she still exists as a lady of her time, but progressively becomes regarded as more the eccentric. She periodically makes references to what she calls her "deranged practicality," which is part of what makes her story a joy to read. She has wild ideas that she then orders and executes with scientific precision.

Descriptions of places come to the reader through the lens of Isabella’s detail-oriented mind, cataloging specs and features, which keep us
The sheer detail also goes a long way for suspension of disbelief, because explaining the physics of how a dragon wing is structured goes a long way towards my ability to believe that it actually can work. She grounds her story firmly in the details, so the fantastical aspects seem utterly natural.

The POV gives Marie Brennan a lot of room for commentary. None of it is overhanded, but all of it was poignant. She manages to cover culture shock, the relative importance of proprieties given time and distance, the notion that scientific understanding changes with time, people who moralize from the comforts of their homes with limited understanding of realities in other places and walks of life, and the revolutionary idea that she could be both feminine and not feeble in the least. All this, and with a sense of humor: she deals with one double standard by commenting that although her editor is exploding, she sees no reason that she should be able to write about animal anatomy but not her own hips or breasts. She notes that despite exoticiized stories of "flashing-eyed" women, she never once met anyone who emitted strange lights from her eyes.

I appreciate that Lady Trent gave no pretense of her marriage being a grand passion, and discussing a different kind of love based on mutual respect that grows over time. There's not anything wrong with grand passion in a story, of course; but I do like to see other kinds of romantic subplots from time to time—not only because reading only one kind of love story give people very skewed ideas on what to expect out of life, but I also appreciate the variety.

Of course, I have a few quibbles. I admit that I wasn't excited about the up-tight and strict mother vs. saintly father trope, but at least she qualified it. I also didn't appreciate that the narrative makes it sound like the protagonist is the only woman in the world to be intelligent, let alone to have a scientifically minded brain. With the exception of one maid, all the other women in the story are interested in social standing and talk about nothing of import. Part of that could be a reflection of how the narrator perceived other women in her society, but to me it came across as all the male characters were allowed to have multifaceted beliefs and approaches, but the women seemed to behave as a whole—excepting our narrator.

There were a couple instances of faulty tense, which I'm fairly sure was an intentional choice to not spoil suspense. For instance, "So-and-so is good at tennis," when So-and-so is actually dead before the end of the story. The book is written with the present-tense narrator narrating the affairs of her younger self, so the narrator would of course be aware that So-and-so dies before the end of her story. There were only a couple of misleading present tenses, and in those cases using the past would have given away something critical, which is why I'm convinced they're deliberate. Other than those few, Brennan handled the switching between tenses flawlessly, which is no mean trick. Often times such switching can feel choppy or jarring, but the author blended the narrative seamlessly.

I suppose if you're looking for epic dragon slaying hunts, this book may not be for you (though there is certainly some dragon slaying involved). This isn't an epic take on dragons; it's a memoir of scientific and personal discovery. There's no obvious antagonist to defeat beyond lack of understanding, but what makes A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS so riveting is Isabella's quest not just to better understand dragons, no matter the cost, but to understand the metaphorical dragon in herself. I found the book completely engrossing, and I can't wait for the next installment.

All About Romance (Novels) review:
I adore stories with dragons in them. I grew up with Anne MacCaffrey's Pern books, and Naomi Novik's Temeraire series of historical fantasies is among my favorites. So I jumped at the opportunity to review Marie Brennan's A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS: A Memoir by Lady Trent, the first installment in a series of fantasy novels set in an alternative 19th century. The author had me at this passage in the prologue: “Be warned, then: the collected volumes of this series will contain frozen mountains, foetid swamps, hostile foreigners, hostile fellow countrymen, the occasional hostile family member, bad decisions, misadventures in orienteering, diseases of an unromantic sort, and a plenitude of mud. You continue at your own risk.”
The novel begins with the now old first-person narrator announcing that as an addendum to her scientific publications, which she assumes the reader to be familiar with, she proposes to tell the adventures that form the basis for the scientific discoveries that have made her famous. The narrative proper starts with the heroine, Isabella Hendemore, growing up as the only daughter (among several boys) of a wealthy landowner in Scirland (the equivalent of Britain; all places in the book bear imaginary names, but are – so far – based on real nations or cultures). Isabella has been fascinated by dragons from her early youth, trying to conserve dragonfly-like small species, and tricking her father into ordering books about dragons for his library.

When she is old enough to have a season in Falchester (London), her father surprises her by handing her a list of men whom he knows to have a copy of A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS, the most comprehensive study on dragons at that time, in their libraries, and might be just open-minded enough to not mind a wife having scientific interests. Isabella comes across Jacob Camherst, one of the gentlemen on the list, in the king’s menagerie, pursues the acquaintance, and when Jacob asks for her hand, she accepts him gladly. Isabella’s early happiness is soon overshadowed by a miscarriage followed by depression, and in order to cheer up again, she once more takes up her dragon studies with great enthusiasm. When an opportunity opens up for Jacob to join an expedition to Vystrana (a Hungary of sorts), she first gets him to agree and then to permit her to come along.

Because everything is told from Isabella’s point-of-view, she is both easy and difficult to like. The enthusiasm and seriousness with which she follows her interests make her appealing, and the descriptions of the dragons and her research made me wish to observe over her shoulder, or at least watch a documentary about the dragons on the Discovery Channel.

I enjoyed reading A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS a lot, and am looking forward very much to the next volume in the series. Because of the distance I felt to most of the characters and partly even to Isabella, the book does not quite reach DIK status, but it comes pretty close.

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**Bookworm Blues review:**

The first thing anyone even looking at this book is going to notice is the artwork, so let us just get that part out of the way. Holy crap, this artwork is amazing. And the cover is the least of it, in my opinion. Drawings add a nice spice and are liberally peppered throughout the book to accentuate various points the narrator is trying to make, and it really helps. Not only does it add some visual stimulation to a more mental framework, but it’s just nothing short of damn beautiful. Seriously, the artist deserves an award for this one. Period.

**A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS** is written in a memoir form, by the Lady Trent (who hasn’t attained her ladyship yet). This is written about her younger years, her discovery of science (not a hobby ladies of class subscribe to) and how she went about learning all the things her mother tried so hard to keep her from learning. While this book takes place on a secondary world, the mannerisms are very Victorian, an era that seems to crawl under my skin the wrong way in every single book I’ve ever read, but this one. It really worked here and I don’t think the book would have worked nearly so well if not for the era it had taken place in, with the social classes dealt with.

**A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS** will either bore readers to tears, or they will absolutely love everything this book has to offer. I think it depends
on mindset more than anything else. I am a science-minded person and I do (more often than I'd like to admit) read natural history and biology books that are more like doorbusting tomes. Slow science discovery fascinates me. The realistic fight a woman has to be recognized as a formidable talent in a man's world adds a nice spice to all the learning that my science aimed brain truly enjoyed. That being said, other people might find the details a bit too tedious, and if you are a person who doesn't really give a fig about the anatomy of an animal or how archeology and the study of natural objects happens, this book might not work for you. You'll probably find it boring, no matter how interesting the protagonist's plight to be recognized for her intellect in her man's world, is.

Isabella is a loveable character who put me in the mind of many early female scientists who were in for the love of the game, rather than anything else. Marie Curie, for example. Many areas of science have been pioneered by women who were too passionate to be able to sit down and shut up when they were told to do so. Brennan really infuses Isabella with that quality, and does it very nicely. Isabella isn't a woman that does her time proud. She's everything woman shouldn't be and despite trying hard not to be that way, her inner science rebel always finds a way of peeking out at the most inopportune times.

She falls upon the sort of grudging respect relationship that a woman could hope for at a time like that. Things were awkward, and Brennan did a great job showing how a woman of her class might adjust to a life of marriage after being a member of her family's house for so long, including her own boredom, and her faults with lacking at various wifely duties. It's obvious that Isabella isn't cut out to be a keeper of the manner, and soon the opportunity rises for her to go and do what she's always dreamed of doing. Being able to do this takes a lot of convincing, and many people think she's absolutely mad, but passion overrides that and she sets off as a young woman into an adventure that will make her cross her threshold into womanhood.

Isabella's time with her husband and her group in the foreign country studying dragons is quite interesting, as much of how Brennan describes the naturalist and archeological methods of the time are, I'd assume, quite surprisingly accurate. In fact, everything from traveling (basically moving your whole house) to writing maps and interacting with the locals would be exactly how I'd expected it was in earlier days here. While many people might fault these parts for dragging on slowly, I will again remind readers that this book won't please everyone. Those who are science minded might very well enjoy the scientific process that the group uses to discover as much as they can about these mysterious beasts. It's like Brennan has taken her readers back through time to see how it was done years and years ago. Fascinating, and incredibly well researched.

Isabella is the star character, and you'd expect that from the narration of it. However, the story is being told from an old woman's perspective and much of the romance and emotional mystery has been stripped from it, which I was grateful for. In a book, it's enough to say that a couple found happiness. I don't need to be part of their foreplay, if that makes sense. Brennan gives privacy where privacy is due, and her character makes plenty of mistakes and faults, so she's not some perfect woman sent to blaze the way for science. No, I think half of A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS is Isabella admitting she made one horrible mistake or another, which is amazingly refreshing.

While it may sound like this book was absolutely perfect, there was a few things that kicked it down a star ranking in my opinion. When Isabella has to face true tragedy, there is hardly any time spent on the emotion. She acknowledges it, but life moves on almost moments later and she's back in the game and ready to go. While one side of me understands this, with my own cancer I tend to leave my "flip out" moments for those secret times when no one can see/hear me, I think it's harder to empathize with the protagonist when we aren't given any room to see or hear any of those private times as they are just vaguely alluded to.

Secondly, some of the "wrapping up" is pretty predictable, which was unfortunate. While I enjoyed Isabella the Naturalist, the end of the book felt more like the story of Isabella also known as Nancy Drew. That's fine, but this switch of the character toward the end caused some of the mysteries to wrap up a bit too quickly and cleanly to be completely believable. In fact, the ending as a whole felt quite rushed and almost
out of sync with the feeling Brennan had set up during the rest of the book.

Do these cons take away from the book at all? In my opinion, it knocks it down a star, but that really doesn't say much because this book really tickled an itch I didn't know I had. I'm not a big fan of Victorian era things. It seems like every protagonist pushing boundaries in these Victorian books are just like the other Victorian protagonists pushing their own boundaries. There's little different and much the same. However, A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS stuck out to me. The characters charmed me, the situations were interesting and well researched and I loved all the science and the science process minus a couple hundred years or so. Not only did Brennan tickle my fantasy bone, but she also tickled my intellectual one, and I appreciated that immensely. Brennan set a wonderful groundwork for an absolutely charming series and my one hope, my one true fervent desire is that the author writes fast, because I want to read the next installment in this series like, yesterday.

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Nocturnal Book Review:
A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS is a lovely, quirky book which reads like a proper memoir, but as the reviews on Goodreads indicate it's not for everyone.

Lady Trent talks about her growing up, getting interested in dragons, obsessed with them, getting married to someone who shared her passion and at last embarking on her first expedition in a matter of fact simple narrative.

Vystrana where everything exciting happens, is a backward pseudo Eastern European country with quirky customs and superstitions, and to get used to it is really hard for Isabella. Her complaints about the weather and the people, her descriptions of day to day life however are old-fashioned and charming like something you would expect of Jonathan Harker's writing.

The approach to dragons again is very scientific and meticulous. In Vystrana they behave out of norm and attack people, and it's up to the naturalists to understand why and to stop the dragons. There is a political intrigue here, danger and excitement, and lady Trent with her companions are slowly adding pieces of the puzzle together.

It is a fantasy book but it's mostly a historical mystery - dragons and alternative world-building are the only fantastical elements in the book. It's got its sad moments and its moments of triumph, it's a story easy to believe into and a heroine who you feel for. I enjoyed it very much but I've no clue who to recommend it to. Mostly to people who enjoy historical fiction, I reckon.

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Don D’ammassa review:
Fantasy writers almost constantly focus their stories on the extraordinary people in their created worlds, by which they mean princes and princesses, heroes, legendary thieves, rebels, etc. They much rarely acknowledge that sometimes the most extraordinary people are those concerned with much less grandiose pursuits. This very fine novel is a case in point. The protagonist is a young woman who becomes devoted to the pursuit of knowledge about dragons, and she sets out on a series of journeys to discover everything she wants to know. There are adventures, of course, and mysteries to be solved, but in this instance swinging a sword or casting a spell is not the solution. Getting what we want is generally hard work. I've enjoyed all of Brennan's previous novels to one degree or another but I think this is the one I am most likely to remember twenty years from now.

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Clandestine Critic (UK)
Marie Brennan, the pseudonym of Bryn Neuenschwander, is an American fantasy author who graduated from Harvard University and did graduate studies in folklore and anthropology. This means she is smart and has an affinity with science and mythology, and she brings a naturalness and clarity to her writing in this utterly charming book, about a young lady following her scientific passion for dragons despite the social etiquette of the time, reflecting on her first adventure on the road to becoming the preeminent dragon naturalist.

[Summary]

The book is written in the style of a book from that time, with all the language associated – there is a
lovely use of the word ‘crepuscular’, and dragon bones becoming ‘rapidly frangible postmortem’, and delightful turns of phrase such as ‘take care of a certain biological matter’ as a euphemism for urinating. It is a memoir of an older and famous woman who is reflecting on her youth, which is distant and she has written about before but not in such detail and honesty – she doesn’t care what people think any more. It is a very well written book, acting as an introduction to the world of dragons, as well as to this other world that Brennan has created – there is the Egyptian-like pre-history of the Draconean culture (dragon-headed gods at temples) with an indecipherable written language; there are the mentions of religions, with Vystrana a land of Temple-worshippers and Scirland full of ‘proper followers of the Magisterial path’. It’s a delightful book, accompanied with beautiful charcoal sketches of various dragons observed during the story (done by Todd Lockwood, who also did the amazing cover), and an absorbing introduction to this world of dragons and Lady Isabella Trent. I can’t wait for the next book.

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**Book Yurt review:**

Think Mary Robinette Kowal, only if she’d started with an Amelia Peabody base (as opposed to her Jane Austen inspired Shades of Milk and Honey), and you’ll start to get close to the nature of this book.

A Victorian-esque tale of scientific exploration, shaded with a deft touch of fantasy and starring a plucky (yet proper) leading lady – one that I can’t help but suspect might rather enjoy tea with Gail Carriger’s Alexia – and I ask you, what’s not to like? This book may not be perfect – and admittedly at times it can come across as a tad dry – but I did merrily enjoy reading it, and will definitely be back for more.

First off, in terms of the world-building, this book is just lovely. Set in what seems to be an early Victorian type of society – but in a different world, mind, which allows for fun riffing off the norm (not to mention, dragons) – Brennan succeeds where so many others have failed in that she made me absolutely believe in both the constrictions of Isabella’s social standing and in the way she managed to subvert so many of them while all the while remaining firmly a woman of her time and place. Not once did this book slip into modern tone, vernacular or content – instead it absolutely felt turn of the century as it seamlessly wove together the social fabric of its fantasy world. As for the larger world vista, beyond the drawing rooms and ballrooms, while this book may not have had as much time to explore the wilds or expand the horizon as I would have wished, it did still make for a very proper beginning to Lady Trent’s many adventures (several of which are alluringly hinted at throughout this book) in that there are several interesting locales to explore.

Yet in a lot of ways, this is a quiet book – at its heart it’s basically an ode to Isabella’s absolute fascination with Dragons, so yes, it does involve a fair bit of rumination on biology, which is rather adorable on the one hand, and yet rather dry on the other. This is not a story of Here Be Dragons; of Indiana Jones style adventure – rather it’s a story of academic, scientific discovery, which involves many a scene of looking at bones, and puzzling over behaviors and so on and so forth. Now being a nerd myself, I found plenty to enjoy – I massively enjoyed how aptly Brennan nailed the world of academia, in every sense, from the practical difficulties of fieldwork to the politics of standing/respect in the field, to how even blindingly intelligent people can have glaring blind spots of ignorance, it all just rang so wonderfully true. Not to mention I loved the culture clashes between Isabella and the “rustic” people of the village she finds herself in, and how her internal sighing and gentle condescension concerning the impropriety of it all unwittingly exposed her utter naivete. Suffice to say, I had no trouble turning the pages – but honestly I can see how this book might not be everyone’s cup of tea.

As for the plot, well, as I’ve implied, it’s more of a gentle stroll than a mad dash. Yes, there is a bit of a mystery, and dramatic happenings do occur, but really this is a gentle travelogue, not an action/adventure serial. I was easily interested enough to watch it all play out – though there was one plot point that kind of had me raising a dubious eyebrow – so yes, the plot does all work. I just have to say that I never once thought of the plot as one of the stronger points of this story.

For me, without doubt the strongest point of this story was the voice and character of Lady Trent herself – but I also have to say this: I did at times find myself wishing for a bit more cleverness, a bit
more spark of humor, about Lady Trent’s narration. She was droll at times, to be sure, and I enjoyed how she often rolled her figurative eyes at her younger self (the novel is written in memoir form, by a much older Lady Trent) but mostly Isabella comes across as very factual and very intellectual, which brings at times a bit of remoteness to her narration. I think I was looking for humor as a way to close that gap – though also, admittedly I’ve been rather spoiled by Jane Austen, Gail Carriger and the like, and yes, this is a hugely subjective response, but still, there it is. Still, in the end, while this book may be too dry and studious for some, I did indeed enjoy reading it – and I’ll even call it rather adorable. So yes, without doubt I am looking forward to the next Lady Trent adventure.

Byrt Grade: A-

Ageless Pages Review:
I loved this; I had so much fun reading A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS that I was very reluctant to finish it and end my time with these splendid characters, in this recognizable but very different world. I’ve realized this much about myself as a reader - of a book has dragons in it, I want to read it. NOW. With the first in a new series set in an entirely plausible alternate world, one populated with many many kinds of dragon, Marie Brennan offers up a new, fun, and often funny look at my favorite mythological creature. One that did not disappoint or fail to entertain with its dry wit and keen observations. This is an ambitious novel; one that is utterly unlike any other dragon-focused book I’ve read, and of the most part, A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS succeeds in all it attempts to do something new and fun with the genre.

Written as a memoir, in first-person POV, from that world’s most eminent authority on dragonkind, Lady Trent's voyage from awkward, knowledge-avaricious girl to adventurous authority on all things winged is wholly involving and full of sardonic humor. Against all convention and etiquette, Isabelle thirsts for knowledge, power, and information. Her journey from repressed child to stubborn, determined woman takes her down many interesting paths and across the lives of others who are likeminded - if of the 'appropriate' gender. Along the way, this Jane Austen-esque character is embroiled in mysteries, discoveries, and even a bittersweet love story of her own. Her life is constantly complicated by her unconventional personality from an early age, and Isabella's genuine struggles to find a life she can lead happily made her easy to root for and invest in. She’s a strong and female protagonist in a world where just that is frowned upon and disliked. Isabella, aside from the dragons themselves, is the high point of the novel. Brash, wonderful, stubborn and occasionally quite beastly herself, she is a fully-rounded and well-realized character.

The novel reads like a memoir from the start, in the best way possible. It feels real, and authentic despite its fantastical nature. It’s a brisk, and informative style; one that is full of asides from the future-version of Isabella writing her life. With a wry, often self-deprecating humor ("...to this day I could not carry a tune if you tied it around my waist for safekeeping."). Isabelle's tone is readily, and authentically conveyed to the reader. As a curious child, or an "inknose" (a synonym for our world's "bluestocking" from Victorian times I'm sure), Isabella's narration is steady and easy to follow, even as she delves deeper and deeper into her 'peculiar' obsession for dangerous dragons. She is a more than capable storyteller, and the twists and turns her personal journey takes over the course of the novel is well-handled and full of mystery and deceit to keep readers guessing.

I can't write a review for this and not mention the fabulous illustrations that pop up throughout the novel. Drawn by artist Todd Lockwood, these all-too-infrequent pictures really add a new layer to this odd and charming book. Several kinds of the dragons Isabella encounters are pictured, in lovely and informative detail. Those seen of the dragons and of the settings and places Isabella ventures really add to the overall story and world being created. This novel is more about the scientific quest to understand a dragon, rather than the usual fantasy route of fighting or slaying them, and it continually felt fresh and new. The drawings from "Isabella" help to reinforce that this is a novel about a woman with a thirst to understand nature around her, not to conquer it.

I really, really hope that there will be sequels for this. I want more. At least two more books set in this pseudo-world of fantasy and manners. I usually lament the lack of standalone novels
these days, but this is a novel that deserves needs warrants at least another volume. There is obviously so much more to Isabella’s story - by novel’s end she isn’t even the titular Lady Trent! There are still things alluded to but never explained, plotlines left open... and questions that need answering. With a wealth of detail and striking visuals, there is so much more that could be, and should be, explored in this fantastic alternate history envisioned by Marie Brennan. I will sit and wait and hope that more is forthcoming from this creative author. And soon.

**Fantasy Literature Review:**
I’m not going to start at the beginning with A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS, by Marie Brennan; I’m going to start before the beginning — at the cover. Why? Because it’s gorgeous: a beautifully drawn, silver and blue and grey hued dragon walking on all fours, its left front and right hind leg in the process of moving forward; its powerful legs, erect head, out-thrust chest, and soaring wings proclaiming its power; while the back half has been illustratively flayed to reveal its carefully numbered and delineated muscles, bones, and layers of underskin that create that power. It looks ripped right out of Gray’s Anatomy (the text, not the show). The interior illustrations, also by Todd Lockwood, are equally beautiful, losing little in their shift to simple black and white lines. I wish more fantasy novels had such artistic enhancements and here’s hoping this book encourages it.

Beyond its beauty, the cover is a good place to start because it stands as a good metaphor for this book, which in many ways is two stories rather than one. Unfortunately, the second story, which like the interior illustrations, lacks comparable color and vibrancy, and suffers more than the drawings for that loss.

Brennan had me at the very start with this wry, rebellious, sardonic voice and kept me for a good long time as we meet her younger self, rebelling against the strictures of the time and culture which relegate her to music and husband-hunting when she’d rather be out pursuing knowledge and dragons. Luckily for her, though, not all the men around her ascribe fully to society’s mores and so with understanding and assistance from her father, her husband, and a peer of the realm, she’s soon off to the mountains on her first expedition, where she’ll face “frozen mountains... hostile foreigners, hostile fellow countrymen, bad decisions” and, of course, dragons.

So, props for the voice. And for the characterization, as we really get to feel the frustration and anguish of the younger Lady Trent as she becomes first captivated by dragons and science and then thwarted in her first attempts to make them part of her life. Brennan does a good job as well, if less detailed, with Isabella’s family and her husband to be, whom she meets at the king’s menagerie in a wonderful scene where she must navigate the treacherous balance between seeming “bookish” and being interesting. This first part of A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS, about the first 100 pages, is therefore a sort of Jane Austen coming of age story, if Jane Austen lived in a world with dragons. And it’s my favorite part of the book for the above, as well as for its humor and its nice job of offering up some teasing flash-forwards to whet our interest.

Unfortunately, the last two-thirds aren’t as strong. The novel shifts from Jane Austen, and not toward a fantasy that I expected, but more toward a Victorian sort of Nancy Drew. Now, I confess to having had a great crush on Nancy Drew (I’m a sucker for “titian hair”), but still, this shift didn’t work for me. The pacing slowed greatly and while A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS still held my attention, it did so less completely. And while I still enjoyed Lady Trent’s voice, it felt a little less vivaciously spontaneous and more summative. Despite dangers and dragons and smugglers and hidden pits and ruins, etc., the novel felt like it lost a bit of its bright edge, which was a great disappointment as it had started out so strongly. I wanted more dragons, I wanted more of a sense of the world around them (the detail is pretty slim), I wanted more of the “pop” I’d experienced in Lady Trent’s rebellious youth.

By the end, therefore, the book felt like it hadn’t matched the potential and the promise of its first third and while I was interested enough to finish A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS, it wasn’t with the same eagerness that I’d moved through the first hundred pages. It has a wholly endearing beginning, but its pacing throughout the latter parts and somewhat dry presentation of plot turned what had been a thoroughly enjoyable book into an only mildly entertaining one. Lady Trent tells us early on that this is just the first of
her many adventures, and if that is true in its real-world existence as well, I'll certainly give a second book about Lady Trent a look, based not on the bulk of A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS, but in hopes it recaptures the novel's early magic.

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**Ageless Pages Review:**

Pros: realistic world, fascinating protagonist, good pacing

Cons: protagonist is remarkably lucky

Isabella, Lady Trent, looks back on her life in this memoir. It begins with her as a child obsessed with dragons and some of the crazier things she did in order to learn more about them. Her hijinks don't end as she becomes a young lady looking for a suitable match with a library he'll let her read. The book concludes with the first of what would be many excursions researching dragons.

Peppered with illustrations by Todd Lockwood, this is a gorgeous book. The print is a faded brown, rather than black, making it feel old and venerable.

Brennan obviously cribbed from history for this, as Scirland feels much like Victorian England in its social conventions and expansionist ideals. Similarly, Vystrana made me think of Eastern European villages, perhaps along the Russian border (as they're ruled by a Tsar). Regardless of what she cribbed from however, the world feels REAL. There are numerous languages, religions, customs, economic concerns, social concerns (different for men and women), class concerns, etc. In many ways, reading this memoir felt like reading an actual memoir, with just enough details about the daily life and times of the protagonist (which she mentions were different from the life and times of the present from which she's writing).

The pacing is great, with new challenges appearing for Isabella just as the previous ones are dealt with.

The only problem I could see with the book was that Isabella is amazingly lucky. She manages to get herself in and out of some difficult situations with fewer negative consequences than one would expect.

The ending is properly shocking, with the acknowledgement that there's more to the story. Given what she goes through in this volume I look forward to reading about her further adventures.

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**Elitist Book Review:**

Have you ever wondered what a fantasy version of Downton Abbey would be like? I'm not gonna lie, I've watched every episode of the show. I like it quite bit. And yet every time I watch an episode I can't help but wonder what it would be like in a fantasy setting. It wouldn't be too different, which would allow it to retain the charm while still imparting that fantastical sense of wonder.

Earlier this year, after catching up on Downton Abbey, I picked up Marie Brennan's A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS: A MEMOIR BY LADY TRENT. As soon as I began reading I thought, "This is exactly what I've been asking for!" Don't misunderstand me, the entire novel isn't spent in a manor or anything, but it's the attitudes of the characters that make me draw the comparison. DRAGONS is a fantastic novel that should appeal to any readers of Victorian-esque fantasy. It has all the character and cultural charm of those shows where propriety and manners are of the utmost importance. But DRAGONS is also about following your dreams, regardless of your lot in life.

So what is DRAGONS actually about? Well, the title gives away most of it. The novel is told in a memoir format from the PoV of Lady Isabella Trent as she grows up, gets married and goes on an adventure. The entirety of the story is centered around her love for dragons. From her obsession with them as a child, to her first adventure in a foreign part of the world (note: it's not our world). Brennan does a remarkable job of allowing the reader to see and feel the wonder Isabella experiences in her encounters with the beasts. It is this strong female lead that allows the novel to succeed. While all the side characters are fine, none of them really shine - which is to be expected in a "memoir".

The story, while interesting, isn't actually the main focus of the novel. There is enough there to keep a reader going, but much of the world is glossed over due to the PoV. Again, this is a "memoir". We
get only as much of the story as what the Lady Trent considers worthwhile and important. This is equally appropriate and frustrating. Brennan hints at such a deep world, but the PoV of the story just brushes off a lot of it with, "But you can read about that in another memoir." Hopefully this means we'll get more stories set in the world so we can learn more about it all.

As you read the book, story points are punctuated by illustrations courtesy of Todd Lockwood. While I’m not a huge fan of his art depicting people, no one can deny the guy is amazing with dragons. The illustrations throughout the book are fantastic, and really add to the whole package. In fact, the book as a physical product is incredibly well done. If I were an author, I’d be super jealous of the overall production of this novel.

A NATURAL HISTORY OF DRAGONS benefits from the sum of its parts being far greater than any individual piece. The characters are fun and interesting. The story has enough mystique to keep patient readers satisfied. I guess it comes down to the novel feeling...comfortable. Yeah. Comfortable. In every way, when I would sit down to read DRAGONS, I felt like I was truly taking a break. It’s rather hard to describe, but hopefully you get my meaning. Depending on the type of reader you are, you may want to pick this novel up. This is not an action-filled novel. Don’t even expect the same level of action as you see in Brennan’s prior novels, like WITH FATE CONSPIRE. This is a cozy novel meant to help your imagination roam for a time.

**Bibliotropic Review:**

This book is told as the fictional memoir of Isabella Trent, starting from her well-to-do childhood and her initial preoccupation with the common dragons around her home, through adulthood when she decided to throw societal convention to the wind and go off to study dragons on her own instead of staying at home like a proper lady. It was a conventional telling of an unconventional woman’s story, and it allowed for numerous observations not just on the events of her life but also for commentary on culture, gender roles, and general witticisms.

Lady Trent is not content with traditional gender roles and would much rather be a scientist, off in the wild studying dragons. Thanks to an indulgent father and an amused and somewhat befuddled eventual husband (Jacob), this dream becomes a reality, and undertakes a journey into the wilds to study dragons in their natural habitats. Much to the bemusement of many other members of the team.

Avoiding too much commentary on the names of the main couple of the story (Isabella and Jacob – sounds rather Twilight-inspired), the characters themselves were wonderful to read about. Isabella’s self-assured and independent attitude as a counterpoint to society’s restrictions against women were witty, poignant, and her headstrong nature made her a lot of fun. Jacob was more relaxed, permissive of his wife’s “eccentricities,” encouraging her scientific curiosities as he himself shares them. They make an interesting couple, driven and affectionate. They’re not without their troubles, but that just makes them more realistic. The romance between them was actually downplayed, their love coming across more between the lines than through displays of passion, and at times it was hard to see if she cared for him in the same way he cared for her, or whether he was just a means to an end. The subtleties in the writing and the interactions between them made for a stronger relationship, I think.

The scientific explorations of the book are aided along by the artwork of some of the dragons that Lady Trent and the team encounter on their travels, which, along with the beautiful cover art, are meant to convey the sketches that she talks about making, and some of the notes of draconic biology. Rarely do I bother commenting on the artwork associated with any given novel, but here, it’s worth the mention. The art is clean, attractive, and is entirely appropriate for the very plot of the novel itself.

Ultimately, this is a very creative experiment in incorporating traditional fantasy elements with a more modern period setting (Victorian/Edwardian instead of the classic medieval period), with a bonus in the interesting narrative presentation. Brennan’s writing is polished, her pacing slow but smooth, and her ideas sharp and intelligent. If you’re looking for a fantasy novel that really stands out from others, then give this one a try. Bring an open and keen mind, and soon you’ll be wanting to head out into the forests and
mountains and seek out dragons of your own. (Just try to wait until you’ve read the upcoming sequel next spring, The Tropic of Serpents, so you’ll be up to date with all the latest scientific discoveries!)