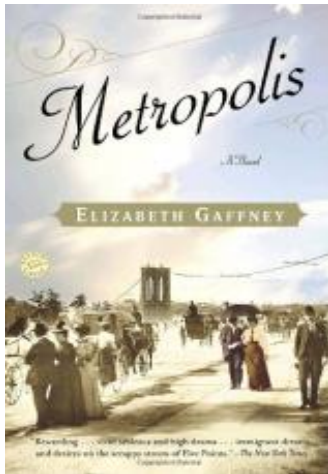


# Metropolis: A Novel

by Elizabeth Gaffney



## About the Book

On a freezing night in the middle of a New York winter, a young immigrant is suddenly awakened by a fire in P. T. Barnum's stable, where he works and sleeps, and soon finds himself at the center of a citywide arson investigation. Determined to clear his name and realize the dreams that inspired his hazardous voyage to America, he will change his identity many times, find himself mixed up with one of the city's toughest and most enterprising gangs, and fall in love with a smart, headstrong, and beautiful woman. Buffeted by the forces of fate, hate, luck, and passion, our hero struggles to build a life --- and just to stay alive --- on an epic journey that is at once unique and poignantly emblematic of the American experience.

## Discussion Guide

1. The hero of **Metropolis** remains nameless for the first part of the book; later, he tries on different names, which he then rejects, each in turn. Why are names important, and why do you think Gaffney chose to complicate her main character's identity in this way?
2. Beatrice O'Gamhna does not initially appear to be the nicest heroine when we first meet her; she is involved in pickpocketing and kidnapping. How did you feel about her character, as you read? What is her appeal?
3. Although the main character is a man, the strongest characters in the book are arguably the women: Mother Dolan, Beanie, Fiona. The issues of women's suffrage, violence against women and women in traditionally male professions such as medicine also come up in the story. What sort of point is Gaffney making? How much do you think society has changed in its attitudes toward women since the nineteenth century?
4. Harris is dogged by bad luck in the book, but he also has his share of very good luck, and there are any number of serendipitous or coincidental events that occur. What role does luck play in the story? Are characters held responsible for

their actions?

5. Harris did not commit the particular crime of arson that he is suspected of, but he is not purely innocent either. Is his sense of guilt appropriate? Is he responsible for the things that happen after he is conscripted into the gang? Does old unresolved guilt carry over into his present?

6. Most of the characters have complicated moral situations: they are good people, and yet they are criminals; or they are criminals, but there is some explanation for how they fell into a life of crime. In certain cases, characters appear to be good, but they are in fact deeply corrupt. In what sort of moral universe do the characters of **Metropolis** live? Are any of the characters strictly good or evil?

7. There are two main villains, Dandy Johnny Dolan and Luther "the Undertaker" Undertoe. Why do you think Gaffney wanted two villains in the story, and how do they differ?

8. The Whyo gang has a complicated secret language and uses a profitsharing scheme where funds are collected according to ability and distributed according to need. They treat women considerably better than do other gangs of criminals; at the same time, the gang is also extremely violent and corrupt. What did you think of the Whyos, in the end, and why? Is it possible to imagine a "good" gang?

9. Several of the characters in the story --- Harris, Beatrice, John-Henry, and Luther --- lost their mothers early in their lives, and Johnny grew up without a father. How do these formative events affect them, and how does each character handle the difficulty of growing up with this loss?

10. There is a large cast of secondary characters in **Metropolis**, as well as many side stories and digressions from the main narrative, on topics such as street paving, sewer building, underwater caisson excavation, women's health and bacteriology. Why did Gaffney choose to include all these characters and themes, and how do you think they contribute to the main story?

11. Do you think that the city of New York is more than just the setting for the novel? Could the city itself be seen as a character in **Metropolis**?

12. Occasionally, the narrator's voice intrudes on the story to comment on the action. How does this change the experience of reading the story? Would you say **Metropolis** feels like an old-fashioned novel, or are there aspects of it that mark the book as a product of the twenty-first century?

## Author Bio

Elizabeth Gaffney is a native Brooklynite. She graduated with honors from Vassar College and holds an M.F.A. in fiction from Brooklyn College; she also studied philosophy and German at Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich.

Her first novel, **Metropolis** a Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Writers selection, was published by Random House in 2005. She is now at work on a second novel, *The End of the Age of Wonder*, and a story collection. Her stories have appeared in many little magazines, and she has translated three books from German.

Gaffney has been a resident artist at Yaddo, the MacDowell Colony and the Blue Mountain Center. She also teaches fiction at the New School and serves as the editor at large of the literary magazine *A Public Space*.

She lives in Brooklyn with her husband, the neurologist Alex Boro, and her two daughters.

## Critical Praise

"Brawny, old-school storytelling . . . a novel as strong and heady as the brew [Gaffney's] rakes and roustabouts swill by the pint."

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### **Metropolis: A Novel**

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**Publication Date:** February 14, 2006

**Paperback:** 496 pages

**Publisher:** Random House Trade Paperbacks

**ISBN-10:** 0812970853

**ISBN-13:** 9780812970852