

The Manor House Governess

C. A. Castle

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In C. A. Castle's engaging novel *The Manor House Governess*, a queer tutor is enmeshed in the intrigues of the family that employs him.

To survive bullying at school for his perceived effeminacy, Bron, who has been abandoned by the boy he loves, loses himself in romantic Gothic novels. But when the University of Cambridge rejects his application, it shatters his dream of securing an elite education. Instead, he accepts a position as a live-in tutor at a posh country estate, where he fancies himself as a modern Jane Eyre.

As the “governess” at Greenwood Manor, Bron leans into his gender fluidity with a blend of gendered attire. His nine-year-old charge, Ada, and her father welcome and accept him. And Ada's handsome, enigmatic older brother Darcy vacillates between drawing Bron in and pushing him away. A sudden fire upends the household, compelling Bron to investigate. And a mysterious photograph album reveals much about the family's past.

Bron is empathetic as he matures, gaining self-assurance across the book's long-winded, ruminative conversations with Darcy about gay identity and dark family secrets. And the novel borrows from British classics with charm: in addition to the fire, its tropes include an orphaned hero of limited means; a lush manor house complete with costume balls and cricket matches; an obscure illness that claims a life too soon; a brooding love interest; and an unexpected turn of fortune. Indeed, it plays off of the Gothic past with such skill that its contemporary references to social media are jarring.

A queer tutor falls into a Gothic mystery on a country estate in the referential contemporary novel *The Manor House Governess*.

PAULA MARTINAC (November / December 2023)

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