

What might it have been like being gay in London in the 1940s? *The Night Watch* gives us a pretty good idea.

The novel opens in 1947, with the solitary Kay, a mannish dresser with a past, aimlessly wandering the streets, or staring out her window inventing stories about passing strangers. Meanwhile, Helen is feeling insecure about her lover Julia, and Helen’s colleague Viv is carrying on a long-standing affair with someone else’s husband. Viv’s brother Duncan is working in a factory and living with an elderly ‘uncle’, someone he knew from prison. There are many mysteries here: most are resolved in the second part of the book, which is set in 1944, with London still under nightly attack from the Germans. This reverse chronology is an interesting (though hardly original) approach, and a final coda that takes us back to 1941 doesn’t deliver much information that couldn’t be surmised.

This is a big traditional novel in the nineteenth century vein – realistic, dramatic and not afraid of coincidences in its plot line. Waters does the minutiae of life beautifully, using her detailed research discretely and naturalistically. This is an immensely readable novel on the enduring themes of love and war.