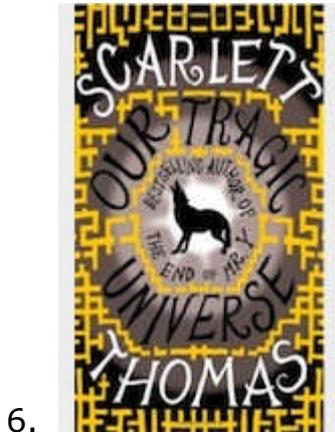


Our Tragic Universe by Scarlett Thomas

This intriguing novel bends time and space says Patrick Ness

Is it odd to describe a book as kind? The commodity itself seems an increasingly rare thing in an internet-frazzled world, and so how unexpectedly wonderful to read Scarlett Thomas's *Our Tragic Universe*, a book that brims with compassion and warmth. I agreed with practically none of its arguments, but I was still happy to spend time debating with its characters, who are just like the exasperating, good-hearted real people you'd call your friends.

1. **Our Tragic Universe**
2. by Scarlett Thomas
3. 444pp,
4. Canongate,
5. £12.99



6. [Buy Our Tragic Universe at the Guardian bookshop](#)

Meg is a borderline poverty-stricken writer in Dartmouth. Having shown promise with the first part of a literary novel, she's never actually got round to finishing it. Instead, she writes pseudonymous genre [fiction](#) according to strict formulae, though she yearns to write something that captures life in all its messy randomness. She also reviews books for the local newspaper, and one day is given *The Science of Living Forever* by Kelsey Newman. Newman's thesis is that, at the very end of time, the universe will contract to a point of infinite power, which computer programmers will then use "to simulate a new infinite universe: a never-ending afterlife".

Meg doesn't take it all that seriously – "What on earth would I do with all that heaven?" – but it does set her thinking about how an infinity of her current life

would be far from desirable. She's living with the unstable and unemployed Christopher, but is dealing with a surprising crush on Rowan, a 65-year-old maritime museum curator who she meets in the local library. Life is further complicated by an array of quirky friends – rather too large an array; even with notes I had a hard time keeping track. But then the Newman book turns out not to have come from her editor after all, so who sent it? And is it a coincidence that he is coming to Totnes to deliver a lecture on his theories? And what does this all have to do with the Beast of Dartmoor?

Much of the book is devoted to discussion and debate, in particular Meg's struggle to write a novel outside the confines of traditional narrative. She constantly argues with friends about the purported evil of strict narrative conventions, particularly within genre, versus the primacy of the "storyless story" and the "historyless history", a conflict that Thomas – a writer of mysteries before the bestselling *The End of Mr Y* – has no doubt experienced.

Meg's objection is that by enslaving ourselves to narrative, we "turn ourselves into fictional characters with no use beyond entertaining people and being emotionally, aesthetically and psychologically neat and tidy". She has a point, but that ignores narrative's ability to allow insight into life's very untidiness. Reading neatness isn't anything like being neat ourselves. In addition, novels that proudly proclaim to be plotless are inevitably packed with incident. So, too, is *Our Tragic Universe*. Will Meg kiss Rowan? Will she leave Christopher? Will she write her novel?

This is where Thomas's kindness becomes so important. One ounce of contempt, and this novel would instantly turn into a sour and easy satire. Within the narrative that she is (perhaps teasingly) eschewing, she provides enough "storyless" space to let her characters contradict themselves and be untidy and likeable and funny. And maybe that's her final point. A "storyless story" may need a story framing it to function. It certainly does if it's going to be a novel. Which of course is a good starting point for another argument, but with Thomas, it's one you'd be happy to keep on having.

Patrick Ness's *Monsters of Men* is published by Walker.