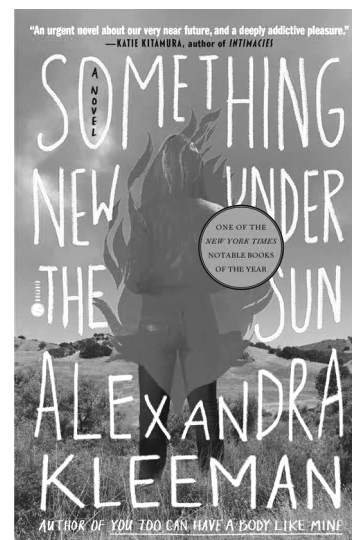


Muddy waters

by Chris Deerin

- 1 If you want to write something that sells, write nature. The bookshop shelves are rammed with tomes about walking in the countryside, stopping to sniff the flora and fondle the fauna, taking time out of your hectic dash to the grave in order to appreciate Mother Earth's glorious bounty.
- 2 Then there's its evil twin, climate change – endless books telling us how to live and how not to, that predict a fiery end regardless of what we might now do, and that guilt us for every plastic food container we toss into the wrong-coloured bin.
- 3 Fiction never misses an opportunity. There are reams of post-apocalyptic novels that take as their starting point the careless carbon-death of society. In the hands of lesser writers, these books are awful: heavy-handed parables, so ornately miserable they leave you cheering on the prospect of mass extinction. The best, though – think of Richard Power's much-praised *The Overstory* – grab and haunt you.
- 4 There are parts of Alexandra Kleeman's *Something New Under The Sun* that reveal a young author of mesmerising talent. She takes a familiar trope – novelist goes to Hollywood, has bad time, leaves jaded, cynical and considering a job in IT – and breathes witty, catty life into it. Patrick Namlin is the writer who finds himself working as a PA (production assistant, but actually more like a personal assistant) on the filming of his own novel.
- 5 An introspective, sensitive type, as writers tend to be, he lands among a horrendous crew – particularly Brenda and Jay, the showbiz producers who seem to be using the movie as a front for something else, and actress Cassidy Carter, a beautiful, unhinged former child star who has spectacularly failed to grow up. Around them, the LA scrubland is permanently on fire, its simmering, ongoing collapse accepted as a fact of life. Water has become a rare commodity, and is sold as WAT-R. Meanwhile a new form of dementia seems to be randomly claiming people, young and old. The book's mystery is a relatively simple one: is there something in the WAT-R?
- 6 Kleeman's prose snaps and crackles. On first meeting, Namlin is bewitched by Cassidy's delicate nose: "It was the sort of nose that reminded you at first of other noses you had loved in days gone by, but then began by degrees to eclipse those other noses, until all you could remember was this new nose, perfect and organic and whole." The author has a dry, Chandler-esque wit.



7 But writers seemingly can't help themselves when it comes to nature. *The Overstory*'s failing is that Powers luxuriates too much in lengthy, florid depictions of trees and flowers and grasses, and Kleeman falls prey to the same sin. *Something New*'s final section is 25 – the novel might be subtitled “A thousand different ways to describe wildfire” – and, fatally, the reader's attention wanders. A shame, because this is otherwise a fantastic read.

Something New Under The Sun by Alexandra Kleeman is out now (4th Estate, £14.99)

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