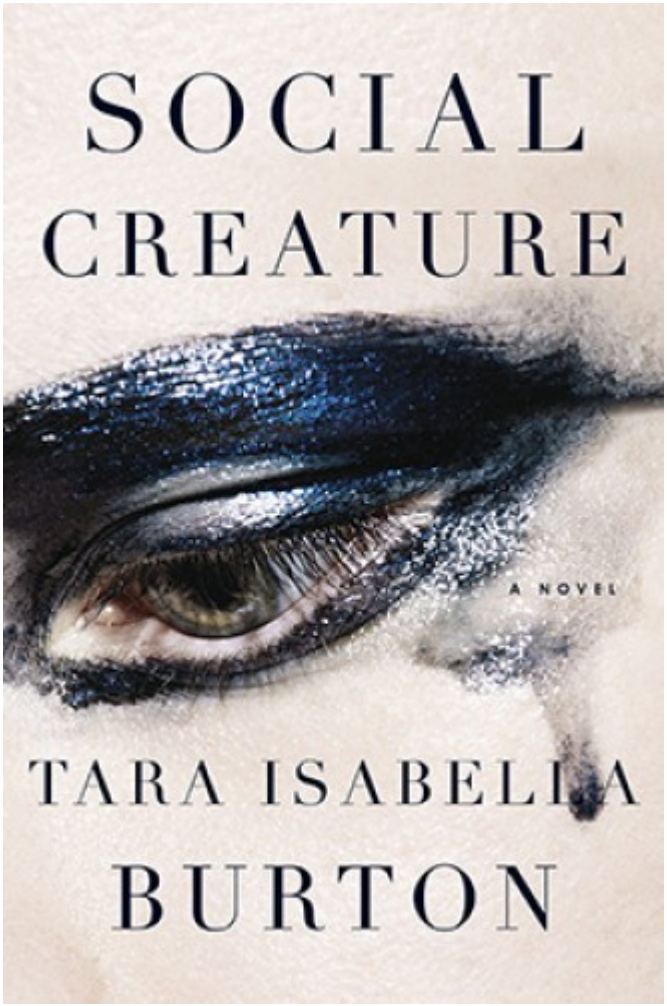
The talented Tara Isabella Burton

In Burton's debut novel, Louise and Lavinia represent the possibility that compulsive self-disclosure is a form of self-concealment.

by Benjamin J. Dueholm in the July 18, 2018 issue

In Review



Social Creature

A Novel

By Tara Isabella Burton
Doubleday

“If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures,” F. Scott Fitzgerald’s narrator observes of Jay Gatsby, “then there was something gorgeous about him.” In literature, if not necessarily in life, the undefined terrain between earnest self-reinvention and outright fraud is endlessly fascinating. There insecurities and aspirations mingle, class distinctions are subtly challenged and reinforced, and affectation sinks deep enough into the skin to become uncannily persuasive and almost genuine. Patricia Highsmith, in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, turned Fitzgerald’s plot around by making her Gatsby figure the killer instead of the corpse. Tom Ripley not only kills the louche son of wealth who takes him on as a retainer, but adopts his identity, gets away with his crime, and makes the audience complicit in the whole performance.

Louise Wilson, the protagonist of Tara Isabella Burton’s caustic and compulsively readable debut novel, follows in these dangerous and charismatic literary footsteps. A Ripleyesque survivor in a setting where anxiety, depression, and bulimia are social and professional adaptations, Louise convinces herself that “we cannot be known and loved at the same time.” One of thousands of subsistence producers in the knowledge economy, she juggles dead-end jobs at a bar, tutoring high school students, and writing content for a bottom-feeding e-commerce site. At the age of 29, eight grueling years after arriving in Brooklyn, she is an aspiring writer who has stopped aspiring. Forcing her smiles, dying her hair, feigning a prep-school pedigree, and embracing the desires of lousy Tinder app boyfriends, Louise grimly and repetitively performs her life until she meets Lavinia Williams.

Lavinia, who hires (but never pays) Louise to tutor her devout and studious younger sister for the SAT, appears to have much more than Louise can pretend to have. She is years younger and shades blonder, adored by a patrician ex-boyfriend, and well-ensconced in the literary circles Louise has given up hope of joining. Lavinia enjoys wealth and leisure on a scale that Louise can scarcely imagine, let alone associate with on equal terms. When Lavinia impulsively takes on the blank and adaptable Louise as a friend-cum-retainer, their lives become quickly and deeply entangled.

No one can much doubt where this sudden friendship will go. Lavinia will introduce Louise to the frantic parties, postcollegiate literati, extravagant clothes, cultural events, and social media buzz that are her demesne. Lavinia will invite Louise to live in the spacious apartment on the Upper East Side owned by her parents (helpfully offstage in Paris), though without ever giving her a key of her own. Louise will develop a facility for inhabiting all these settings. Lavinia's extravagance will turn out to mask weaknesses and insecurities of her own. Louise will prove canny enough to exploit them. The rigid boundary of class dividing the women becomes, in the realm of little intimacies, dangerously porous. And as the narrator says, early and not quite necessarily, Lavinia will be dead soon. Louise, possessed of a new suite of gestures to execute, will attempt to weave through the hazards that follow.

Apart from some second-half wobbles in the emotional dynamics of Louise and Lavinia's circle, Burton pulls off the suspense plot with assurance. Her eye for cultural detail is even more impressive. The running jokes about tea flavors ("hazelnut-cinnamon-pear-cardamom"), publications (*The Fiddler, Misandry!*, *The New Misandrist*), and pretentious character names ("Beowulf Marmont"), suggest that the story could easily have been told as a satirical upstairs-downstairs farce: *The Secret History* meets *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*.

But *Social Creature* does more than cleverly and stylishly recapitulate classic genre forms. It casts a bright, cold light on the vulnerabilities Lavinia and Louise leave open to each other, and on the endlessly self-amusing milieu in which both can be exploited.

For Louise, spurred by shapeless ambitions and chronic financial need, love and friendship become indistinguishable from casual and precarious labor. A reliable tutoring client breaks up with her suddenly—he's been assured of a squash-team acceptance to Dartmouth—then salves the blow to her income with an extra fifty. Like a bad Tinder assignation, he's "back on his phone before Louise even leaves the room." Lavinia requires and pays for emotional labor, and Louise ruthlessly optimizes herself to provide it.

This end-stage interpersonal capitalism can't survive the full and explicit knowledge of both women. While it does last, it's propped up by the hum of social media and the vertiginous thrill of New York nightlife. Dazzling at first, even this becomes transparent. The literary types clustered around Lavinia and Louise wear their learning and their privilege like children dressed in their parents' clothes. The last

night of Lavinia's life is spent at a party whose grotesqueries aim not to amuse, titillate, or even intoxicate but only to surprise people dulled to excess. If "you throw up or cry or run screaming then so much the better, because at least you've felt something." Over the yearlong arc of the novel, it all recurs in a (perhaps literally) infernal cycle: the defrocked priest, the disgraced Egyptologist, the misused taxidermy, the endless musical iterations of "New York, New York."

Social Creature deftly and deeply mines the possibility that compulsive self-disclosure is just another form of self-concealment. In the novel's emotional crescendo, Louise, who does not believe in the possibility, wants badly for the object of her love to "listen to her sobs and her sins, and"—in language borrowed from confession—"understand all that she has done and left undone, and maybe then somebody will know her and love her at the same time."

It's a raw and genuine desire whose fulfillment lies out of view for almost all the characters. If, as Augustine said, the virtues of the pagan world were merely glittering vices, perhaps the knowledge of our own hyperconnected and overexposed world is just glittering ignorance.

The one character who stands apart is Lavinia's sister, Cordelia. If God doesn't exist, the teenage convert to Catholicism tells Louise, "this world would be too terrible for words." This, one suspects, is the root chord of the novel below its thrumming plot and shimmering grace notes. Perfect knowledge and perfect love, after all, coincide only in God. The yearning to be known and loved for anything but the gestures we enact without stumbling will not go away, however badly we treat ourselves and others in pursuing it.