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A Footnote to Plato: A Novel

by Tina Lee Forsee

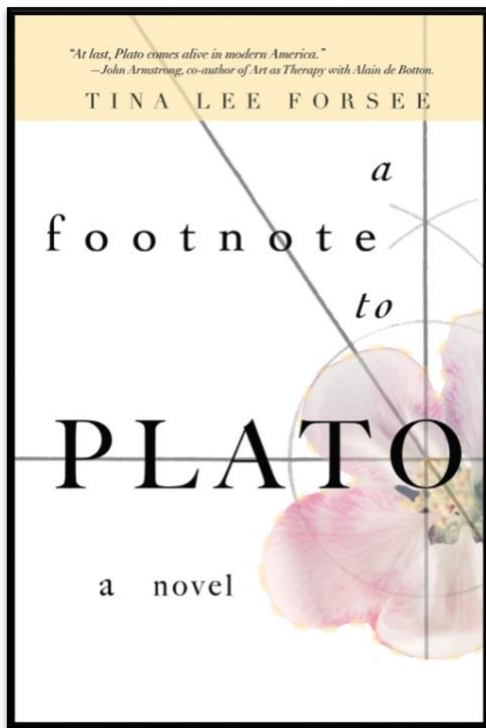
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New Title from Tina Lee Forsee
A Footnote to Plato: A Novel

A Footnote to Plato takes place in 2012 at a tiny liberal arts college in Vermont.



Philosophy professor Dr. Isaac Fischelson finds himself embroiled in a student drama that leads to a false accusation of sexual harassment and an investigation intended to force him out. He faces a disgraceful end to his long career unless he retires immediately. But Dr. Fischelson refuses to be, as his students like to say, an epic failure.

Zeb is a promising math student who has resorted to dealing coke to pay for college. He lives on a failed hippie commune with his toxic mother, who seems intent on bankrupting her son, both materially and spiritually. Zeb tries his best to escape her world, but what he really needs is a bit of luck.

The two meet in the Maintenance Committee and soon form a Socrates–Plato bond. When Zeb offers to help the professor put together an online lecture series, Dr. Fischelson decides to take him and a small group of students to Greece to film it. It's an opportunity of a lifetime for Zeb and Dr. Fischelson's last chance to save his reputation—and maybe leave behind a legacy.

Tina Lee Forsee studied philosophy at Marlboro College in Vermont and now lives in Tucson, Arizona. She is an associate acquisitions editor at *After Dinner Conversation*, a magazine dedicated to philosophical short stories.



Interview with Tina Lee Forsee

How long did it take you to write this book?

10 years, believe it or not. The story takes place in 2012 because that's when I started writing it. Readers might be surprised or taken aback when they see that today's attitudes are not reflected in my novel—people don't seem to realize how much has changed in such a short time—but in the end I decided to stay true to that ripe moment before the #MeToo movement took off.

Would you say your novel is a philosophical novel? Or more about social issues?

I wouldn't call it a philosophical novel, though it is about philosophy and philosophers. The social issues are more about driving the plot to put pressure on my protagonist, to force him to reveal himself. More than anything, though, I'd say my novel depicts the ambition that lies at the heart of the quiet intellectual, an ambition no less forceful and no more profound than that of a great warrior like Achilles.

What are you reading right now?

I'm actually in a nonfiction mood lately, and I'm reading a book called, "The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss" by David Bentley Hart. He's an unabashed Platonist and I'm enjoying the book immensely.

What is your best advice for writers just starting out?

You can't get writing experience by reading books about writing. You're better off taking a class (I took a novel writing class at a nearby community college) and cultivating relationships with writers whose feedback and criticisms resonate with you. Start a critique group in person, if possible, or look for groups online. Seek and give concrete, detailed feedback. Most of all, write. Don't worry about it. Just do it. And keep doing it. But if you don't love it, don't do it. There are other things to do!

Excerpt from *A Footnote to Plato: A Novel*

One time during his early thirties, an acquaintance at a dinner party asked him whether he had any children or was planning to, and his response had been, “I prefer to give birth to ideas.” Although he’d delivered this proclamation with a touch of humor, he’d *meant* it. Ideas were superior to flesh and bone—he’d *believed* that. Perhaps he still did. Yet throughout his entire career, he’d somehow managed to overlook the fact that the ideas he was delivering to the world were never really *his*. Like Socrates, he’d only ever been a midwife.

No, not even that.

A midwife’s midwife? A footnote to a footnote to Plato?

Not even that.

The truth was, his ambitions had been modest, attainable, *realistic*. Respect from his peers, a mention in their publications, minor glory in the smallest of circles—*this* had been his highest aspiration.

And he had failed.

The life of the mind had turned out to be a poor substitute for procreation, at least in his case. After all, if he’d had a family, even a dysfunctional one, even a broken one, then at least he’d have someone to inherit his belongings when he passed away. His house, for instance. It would make a good starter home. Small, but good, well-cared for. That would’ve been *something*. That was the way most people left behind a legacy.

The more he thought about it, what could be more secure? Even if you accomplished nothing with your own life, at least your kids might go on to change the world. Of course, children were no longer a tenable option for him, and it was unfitting for a man his age to still be seeking career fulfillment, which, of course, was exactly what he was doing—

On the third day hence, to fertile Phthia thou shalt go!

Agatha. Her visitations were starting to seem normal, but Isaac continued to marvel at how real she sounded. It was as though she were standing next to his ear. At least, the voice sounded exactly like her, his memory of her.

Get your story straight—he couldn’t help but respond to her in his thoughts—*it’s been well over three days and I’m still here*.

A midwife, like Socrates. Hearing voices, like Socrates. But unlike Socrates, Isaac had no idea where his voice came from. God? Reason? Or was it insanity?

Hunger, more likely. He thought about filling up a plate to take back to his office, where he’d undoubtedly fall asleep at his desk and dream of Agatha’s un-openable paper bag, which anyhow seemed preferable to painting the foyer with Daniel, who might show up after all.

But duty called. Isaac would shovel food in his face and pretend to mind his own business as news about his Plato class spread throughout the dining hall. The kids would call his class an *epic* failure, and he'd overhear them and grumble at their misuse of the word. Later they'd see him in the foyer pretending to get along with the Bible thumper who'd ruined his class, and they'd call him a . . . slang word he couldn't remember.

Uri's smirk came to mind.

The Final Fischelson.

Finally, Isaac was beginning to understand what students meant by giving him this nickname. The Final Fischelson was *unique*, they'd said, *the last of his kind*.

But that didn't mean *extraordinary*.

It meant *already extinct*.

Praise for *A Footnote to Plato: A Novel*

“*A Footnote to Plato* is precisely observed and amusing, playing the Platonic quest for virtue against the ethical regression of contemporary academia. Even without the Platonic material, the novel is, in spirit, knowingly playful in a way that Plato would surely recognize.”

—Luke Slattery, author of *Reclaiming Epicurus*

“Brilliantly confronts one of the great—and urgent—needs of culture: to reveal the often distant power of philosophy through the warm intimacy of a page-turning story. At last, Plato comes alive in the middle of modern America.”

—John Armstrong, co-author of *Art as Therapy*

“In this captivating novel, Tina Lee Forsee skewers academic politics, takes us from Vermont to Greece and back, and makes Plato relevant (again) in reckoning with our purpose in life. The winning Alexandra, with her jumpy mind, the perseverating professor, brilliant but troubled Zeb, and a ghostly college president take us on a very lively trip into the cave.”

—Meg Files, author of *Writing What You Know*

“An academic novel and a novel of ideas, served up cheerfully and heroically by a very talented writer who doesn’t care if both these genres are out of fashion. You shouldn’t either.”

—Ptolemy Tompkins, author of *The Modern Book of the Dead*

