

15 London children died in a World War II attack

Francis Spufford's novel imagines the lives they might otherwise have led.

by [Kaitlyn Lindgren-Hansen](#) in the [December 15, 2021](#) issue

In Review



Light Perpetual

A Novel

By Francis Spufford

Scribner

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During World War II, a 1944 attack on a London Woolworths store killed 168 people, including 15 young children. This tragedy is the starting point for Francis Spufford's latest novel, which he says "is partly written in memory of those South London children, and their lost chance to experience the rest of the twentieth century."

Light Perpetual follows the lives of five fictional children—Jo, Val, Vern, Alec, and Ben—by tracing trajectories that might have been. The first section of the book imagines the children's futures five years after the bombing; from then on, the sections are structured in 15-year intervals. In each section, brief vignettes give momentary but memorable glimpses into the lives and personalities of these richly drawn characters. Jo is an aspiring musician who never makes it as far as she wants to; her sister Val falls in with a skinhead and has to reckon with her complicity in a horrible crime; Vern cons his way through business projects while harboring a quiet love of opera; Alec juggles family, labor disputes, and his intellectual curiosity; and Ben struggles with his mental health before finding a lover and faith that, together, heal him.

Spufford's background as a nonfiction writer shines through in this impressive rendering of 20th-century London. Whether he is depicting the process of typesetting, the monotony of working on a double-decker bus, or the affective energy that accompanies listening to music, Spufford hits the mark in portraying the small mundanities that compose a life. The characters' vignettes are written with intimacy, but the novel resists collapsing into sentimentality.

Perhaps the most compelling element of *Light Perpetual* is Spufford's ability to manipulate temporality itself, to consider both the paucities of time and the infinities it contains. The opening pages of the novel describe the dropping and explosion of the bomb at Woolworths in careful, slow detail that seems to stop time itself: "One ten-thousandth of a second is a fat volume of time, with onion-skin pages uncountable. . . . Do we move in time, or does it move us? This is no time for speculation. There's a bomb going off." The prose itself creates a fissure in time, which the reader is relentlessly drawn into.

Beyond the novel's initial meditation on time, the vignettes vividly capture how time is experienced in different bodies. Ben's mental illness ruthlessly accelerates and congeals time, all while the world outside maintains its methodical pace. Vern's attention to the opera fractures time, separating Vern the con artist from Vern the lover of the fine arts. Val remains frozen in time until she detaches herself from an unhealthy friendship, which forces her to make up for all the time she's lost.

The vignettes also show rare moments in which the five characters briefly meet over the course of their lives. These moments never feel too contrived, because the connections are often insignificant to the characters, blips on their larger time lines. Spufford uses these temporary points of contact to underscore continuity between the past and the present. In one vignette, Alec slips and calls Vernon by his cruelly given schoolyard nickname, Vermin, collapsing the hesitant peace they have built in his living room. Their dislike of each other stretches unchanging through time.

As expertly as Spufford depicts relationships that remain unchanging through time, he also attends to the endless divergences that accompany time's passage. With such richly imagined characters, it is easy to forget that *Light Perpetual* is an alternate history; these children are already gone. The novel represents just one alternate history, while infinitely more unfold around the characters with each passing moment. For example, Jo's reflection on songwriting is simultaneously a reflection on the structure of the novel itself:

She notices how inevitable the tune is already sounding: how meant, how deliberate, thing that she has been pulling together from who knows what vapour, who knows how. It's necessary, this hardening of the separate parts of a song. Without it . . . the rest would melt back into the mush of possibility again.

Each decision sediments reality, even as time's possibilities linger in the background.

While Spufford's beautiful prose and detailed characters push us to consider the effects of the war on people, landscapes, and political movements, the novel also reproduces harmful tropes, particularly in Val's vignettes. For example, through most of the novel Val is in a long-standing relationship with Mike, a neo-Nazi whose violence both frightens and fascinates her. On the surface, the portrayal is prescient, given our renewed attention to the threats of White supremacy. However, the

characterization of Mike pivots on Val's realization that Mike is gay:

Father Tim liking men was presumably as much against his church's rules, what little she knew about them, as Mike's desire had been against the rules for a Bexford mod, a Bexford skin, a South London Nazi. And yet Father Tim seems to manage it without violence, without having to be attacking male bodies to get close to them, kicking and clawing and breaking them when he only wanted to be pushing and nuzzling at them.

Val's framing of Mike's virulent White supremacy as a by-product of his sexuality both demonizes gay men and dilutes the myriad influences which shape violent political movements. Rather than responding in a way that prompts readers to engage critically with the complex intersections of racism and homophobia, Val's revelation relies on a worn stereotype that feels out of place in an otherwise well-crafted narrative.

Eventually, time does its steady work on Jo, Val, Vernon, Alec, and Ben. The last vignettes show them at the end of their lives considering the manifold paths they might have taken. Lovers lost, careers changed, enemies made, fame not grasped. As they consider their lives, molded from possibility and sedimented by quotidian decisions, Spufford reminds us that this is only one iteration of infinitude.