

Back to the future of literature: Niffenegger's 'Wife'

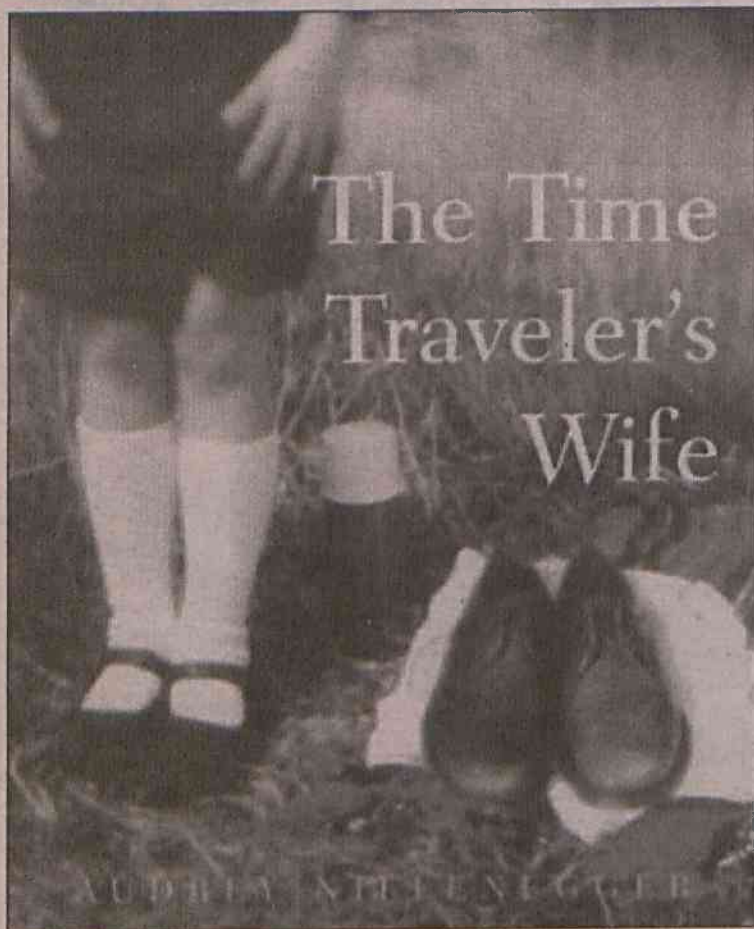


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Blake Hinton

Reviewer

Out of all genres to write about, time travel is easily the hardest. It's the hardest, not in the writing aspect, but because of the fact the story has been done hundreds of times before. In this day and age, a story simply about time travel is boring. To have true success is to bring a new element to the table. Jack Finney did it with his classic time travel novel "Time And Again." Now, decades later, author Audrey Niffenegger does it again with her new novel, "The Time Traveler's Wife."

What makes this book so innovative is the creative plot and unique style. In fact, the story is very reminiscent of Kurt Vonnegut's "Slaughter-House Five." In "Wife," the two main characters are a married couple, Henry and Clare De Tamble. Henry is a Chicago librarian who is the victim of a new disease named "chrono displacement" disorder. Because of this disease,



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Henry is unstuck in time. Without warning, Henry pops backward and sometimes forward in time while his wife remains helplessly in the present. Henry always returns to the present, but what makes the disorder dangerous is neither Henry nor Clare ever know how long the trip will last. The novel tracks their marriage as Clare struggles between her fear of what might happen to Henry and her love for him.

Niffenegger writes a potent love story with endearing characters, but more importantly, she knows how to keep track of all of them. Throughout the book, there are only about four main characters. But there are many different versions of them. For example, when Henry pops back in time, he might meet a future or past version of himself or one of the other characters. There are many witty scenes where two Henrys of two different ages meet and chat. Because of the author's deft handling of the material, what could have been hokum becomes incredibly realistic.

It's amazing to think that this is only the author's debut novel. It becomes even more incredible when considering the style it's written in. Since the book is told from the point-of-view of both Henry and Clare things could have been con-

fusing. After all, by the time the book ends, the reader has met at least eight different versions of Henry and Clare. For lesser authors, this approach would prove disastrous. The shuttling back and forth in time would become annoying and ultimately incoherent. Thankfully, Niffenegger doesn't let that happen. She is always in control of her material and makes what is a complicated story very clear. One has to wonder what she has up her sleeve for her next novel.

If Valentines Day had not already passed, this would have been a great book for couples to read. While the story has many fantastic elements, at its core is a powerful story of true love overcoming all odds. It sounds corny, but Niffenegger makes it so fresh. In the end, this is what true science fiction is. Like other classic authors in this niche, Niffenegger realizes that one does not need to be entrapped by the genre. Instead, she uses a fantastic story to convey important messages about love, fate, and our place in this world. As much as it sounds, this is not chick lit. It's a story for both genders and an amazing one at that.

Contact Blake Hinton at pendulum@elon.edu or 278-7247.

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