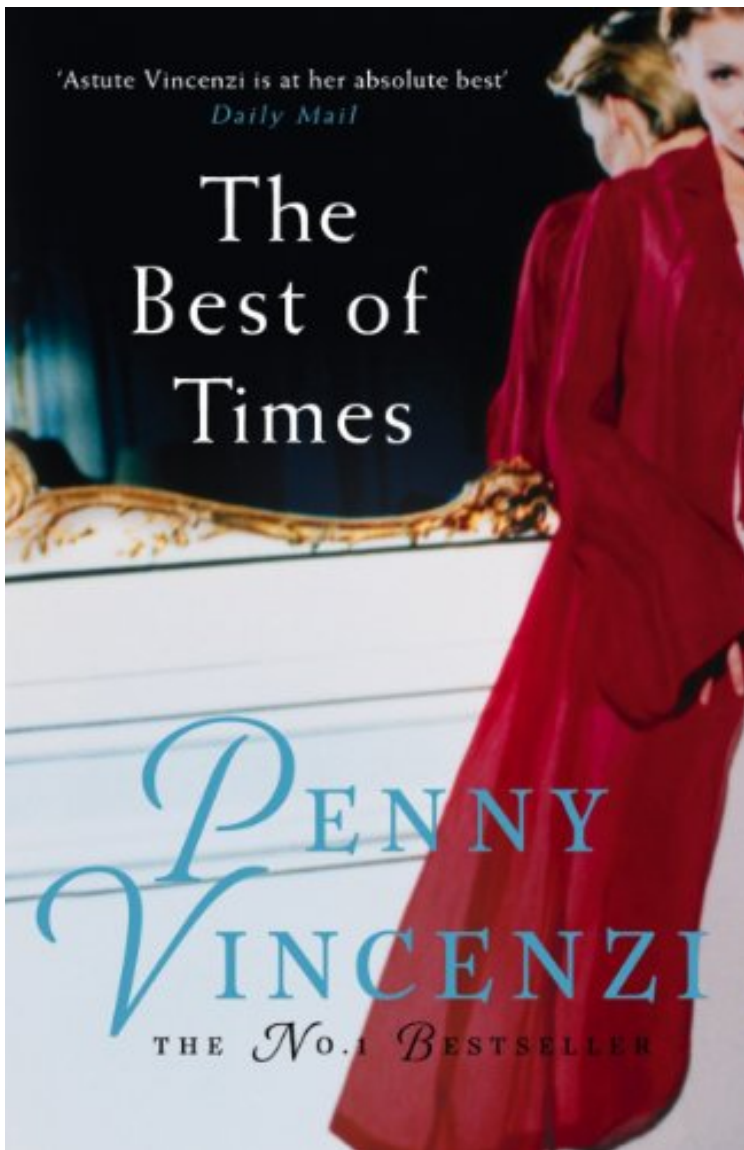


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The Best of Times (English Edition)



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurOn a hot summer's day, a lorry slews across a motorway and causes a huge pile-up. In that split-second accident, lives are changed forever. THE BEST OF TIMES - an exhilarating novel of secrets and lies from the Sunday Times bestseller Penny Vincenzi 'Highly addictive' Daily TelegraphJonathan is a successful surgeon returning from a liaison with his mistress, Abi; Georgia is a young actress on her way to an audition for the part that could make her career; Toby is a bridegroom travelling to his wedding with his best friend, Barney; Mary is a widow, trying to get to the airport to reunite with her wartime first love, and William is a young farmer who witnesses the crash from across the hill. One incident - and only one person who really knows what happened.ExtraitCHAPTER 1Laura Gilliatt often

said--while reaching for the nearest bit of wood--that her life was simply too good to be true. And indeed, the casual observer--and quite a beady-eyed one--would have been hard-pressed not to agree with her. She was married to a husband she adored, Jonathan Gilliatt, the distinguished gynaecologist and obstetrician, and had three extremely attractive and charming children, with a career of her own as an interior designer, just demanding enough to save her from any possible boredom, but not so much that she could not set it aside when required, by any domestic crisis, large or small, such as the necessity to attend an important dinner with her husband or the nativity play of one of her children. The family owned two beautiful houses, one on the Thames at Chiswick, a second in the Dordogne; they also had a time-share in a ski chalet in Meribel.

Jonathan earned a great deal of money from his private practice at St. Anne's, an extremely expensive hospital just off Harley Street, but he was also a highly respected NHS consultant, heading up the obstetric unit at St. Andrews, Bayswater. He was passionately opposed to the modern trend for elective caesareans, both in his private practice and the NHS; in his opinion they were a direct result of the compensation culture. Babies were meant to be pushed gently into the world by their mothers, he said, not yanked abruptly out. He

was, inevitably, on the receiving end of a great deal of criticism for this in the more vocally feminist branches of the media. The beady-eyed observer would also have noted that he was deeply in love with his wife, while enjoying the adoration of his patients; and that his son, Charlie, and his daughters, Daisy and Lily--his two little flowers, as he called them--all thought he was absolutely wonderful. In his wife he had an absolute treasure, as he often told not only her but the world in general; for as well as being beautiful, Laura was sunny natured and sweet tempered, and indeed, this same observer, studying her quite intently as she went through her days, would have been hard-pressed to catch her in any worse humour than mild irritation or even in raising her voice. If this did happen, it was usually prompted by some bad behaviour on the part of her children, such as Charlie, who was eleven, sneaking into the loo with his Nintendo when he had had his hour's ration for the day, or Lily and Daisy, who were nine and seven, persuading the au pair that their mother had agreed that they could watch High School Musical for the umpteenth time until well after they were supposed to be in bed. The Gilliatts had been married for thirteen years. "Lucky, lucky years," Jonathan said, presenting Laura with a Tiffany eternity ring on the morning of their anniversary. "I know it's not a special anniversary, darling, but you deserve it, and it comes with all my love." Laura was so overcome with emotion that she burst into tears and then smiled through them as she looked at the lovely thing on her finger; and after that, having consulted the clock on their bedroom fireplace, she decided she should express her gratitude to Jonathan, not only for the ring but for the thirteen happy years, in a rather practical way, with the result that she got seriously behind in her school run schedule and all three children were clearly going to be late for school. Laura had been nineteen and still a virgin when she had met Jonathan: "Probably the last in

London," she said. This was not due to any particular moral rectitude, but because until him, she had honestly never fancied anyone enough to want to go to bed with him. She fancied Jonathan quite enough and found the whole experience "absolutely lovely," she told him. They were married a year later. "I do hope I'm going to cope with being Mrs. Gilliatt, quite an important career," she said just a little anxiously a few days before the wedding; and, "Of course you will," he told her. "You fit the job description perfectly. And you'll grow into it beautifully." As indeed she had, taking her duties very seriously; she loved cooking and entertaining, and had discovered a certain flair for interior design. When they had been married a year, and their own lovely house was finished to both their satisfaction, she asked Jonathan if he would mind if she took a course and perhaps dabbled in it professionally. "Of course not, darling, lovely idea. As long as I don't come second to any difficult clients." Laura promised him he wouldn't; and he never had. And neither, as the babies arrived, in neat two-year intervals, did they; for many years, until Daisy was at school, she simply devoted herself to them, and was perfectly happy. She did have to work quite hard at reassuring Jonathan that he still came absolutely first in her life, and was slightly surprised at his impatience and near-jealousy created by the demands of the children. Clearly her mother had been right, she reflected--all men were children at heart. For the first few years, therefore, she employed a full-time nanny; for the demands of Jonathan's professional life on her time were considerable, and he liked her to be totally available to him. But

when Daisy went to school, she began quite tentatively to work. She had a particular flair for colour, for using the unexpected, and she was beginning to earn a small reputation. But it all remained little more than a pleasingly rewarding hobby, very much what she did in her spare time: which was not actually in very large supply. But that was how Jonathan liked it; and therefore she liked it too. * * * Spring that year had been especially lovely; it arrived early and stayed late, perfect green-and-gold days, so that as early as April, Laura was setting the outside table for lunch every Saturday and Sunday, and as May wore on, she and

Jonathan would eat dinner outside as well, and watch the soft dusk settle over the garden, listening to the sounds of the river in the background, the hooting of tugs, the partying pleasure boats, the raw cries of the gulls. "How lucky we are," she said maybe a hundred times, smiling at Jonathan across the table, and he would raise his glass to her and reach for her hand and tell her he loved her. * * * But now it was midsummer and the rain had arrived: day after relentless day it fell from dark grey skies. Barbecues and summer parties were being cancelled, floaty summer dresses put away, the shops holding what they called end-of-season sales, and a stampede began for flights to Majorca and Ibiza for long weekends in the sun. For the Gilliatts there was no such stampede; Laura was packing, as she did every year, for their annual pilgrimage to the lovely golden-stone farmhouse in the Dordogne, where the sun would shine down unstintingly on them, heating the water in the pool, ripening the grapes on the veranda vine, and warming the stones on the terrace so that the lizards might siesta in the afternoons along with their landlords. "And thank goodness for it," she said. "Poor Serena is so dreading the holidays, keeping the boys amused all those weeks, well, months really _._._." Jonathan said just slightly shortly that he had thought the Edwardses were off to some ten-star hotel in Nice, not to mention the week they would spend with the Gilliatts on the way down; Laura said, well, that was true, but it still added up to just over three weeks, and that left six or even seven in London. Jonathan said that most of his NHS patients would not regard that as too much of a hardship, given the three and a half weeks of luxury sunshine; he was less fond of Mark and Serena Edwards than Laura was. Mark was a public relations consultant for a big city firm, oversmooth and charming, but Serena was Laura's best friend and, in Jonathan's view, made Laura the repository of just too many confidences and secrets. Jonathan was not able, of course, to spend nine weeks in the Dordogne; he took as much of his annual leave as he could and, for the rest of the time, flew out each Friday afternoon to Toulouse and back each Monday. And so, as she read reports of what appeared to be almost continuous rain in England, and indeed listened to friends in England complaining about it and telling her how lucky she was not to be there, Laura savoured the long golden days even more than usual, and even more than usual counted her own multiple blessings. * * * Linda DiMarcello was aware that she also was fairly fortunate, which meant that, given her line of work, she was doing very well indeed. Linda ran a theatrical agency, and as she often said, her role was a complex one. She was, in almost equal parts, nanny, therapist, and hustler; it was both exhausting and stressful, and she threatened repeatedly to give it up and do something quite different. "Something really undemanding, like brain surgery," she would say with a smile. But she knew she never would; she loved it all too much. The agency's name was actually DiMarcello and Carr; Francis Carr was her nonsleeping partner, as he put it, a gay banker who adored her, had faith in her, and had put up the money for the agency, in return for "absolutely no involvement and forty per cent of the profits." So far it had worked very well. She was thirty-six, an acknowledged beauty, with dark red hair, dark brown eyes, and a deep, Marlene Dietrich-style voice, and she had been to drama school herself before deciding she really couldn't hack the long, long slog into nonstardom and that she rather liked the idea of agenting. She had had the agency for five years; before that she had worked for several of the established organisations before setting out on her own. And she had proved to have a talent for it; she could look at an apparently plain, shy girl and see her shining on the screen; at a charmless, ungracious lout and know he could play Noel Coward. She didn't have many big stars on her books--yet. She had Thea Campbell, who had just won a BAFTA for her Jo in the new BBC versio...
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