



The Missing Shade of Blue

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Of French and Scottish parentage, Edgar has come to Edinburgh from Paris to work on a French edition of Hume's essays, flat-swapping with a Scottish academic writing a book on Sartre ("no doubt in my mind as to who had got the better deal"). While in Edinburgh he is sucked into the orbit of a charismatic, self-hating philosopher, Harry Sanderson, and his enigmatic artist wife, Carrie. Edgar has "always worked on the principle that a translator is a guest in somebody else's house"; as he listens to both versions of the breakdown of their marriage, he realises that he is a guest in Harry and Carrie's city, their language and their lives, and begins to wonder why he has never fully occupied his own.

The Missing Shade of Blue Details

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Author : Jennie Erdal

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Alan Stuart says

Interesting philosophical novel set mostly in Edinburgh where a young Frenchman has come to translate essays of Hume, and is caught up in the dissolving marriage of a philosophy lecturer and his artistic wife

Clarkers says

This was immensely tedious. I stuck with it out of a sort of grim hope that I would somehow be enlightened by the end. Alas, no. There are some keenly observed exchanges and some fine descriptive writing but overall it didn't work for me because I was constantly aware of the narrative machinery clunking noisily away beneath the text. Too many of the conversations are contrived to illuminate some neat philosophical world view and the way the writer goes on and on about translation being like art (it isn't) is dull beyond words. Or not quite beyond words, as she writes pages and pages about it. Nothing happens and by the end you want the characters to all die. Unfortunately only one of them does.

Zahwil says

This book is very enjoyable to read. It is full of philosophical insights that come naturally and are woven into the book through the characters, which are well developed.

There's a lot in this book about happiness. One character, Amandine, becomes a full-time caregiver for her sister who became brain-damaged after an accident. She now has just a single 24 hour period per month of relief when an agency provides support. Despite the misery of Amandine's circumstances, Edgar observes "Her pleasures had become uncomplicated, but the happiness they contained was no less."

Happiness seems to lie in simplicity: fly-fishing, in the case of Harry Sanderson; and not in philosophy, which can lead to the "disease of the learned". Indeed, Hume seemed to arrive at the discovery that "a happy life was made up of quite ordinary moments - in the company of friends, dining together, drinking together, being active, not thinking too much".

The so-called "Missing Shade of Blue" seems to take on multiple meanings. The meaning given derives from Hume's theory that all knowledge originates from our senses; from our experience of the world. Yet, Hume admitted one exception, which was our ability to intuit a shade he had not seen from among a spectrum of shades that he had. So the missing shade of blue refers to our ability to know something that we haven't experienced. In the case of book's protagonist, Edgar, this is clearly love.

As one of Erdal's characters says: "Love and death are the principal concerns in most people's lives". This book is about both.

Bachyboy says

This began very strongly and the writer impressed me with her style and humour. A Frenchman goes to Edinburgh to translate academic essays on philosophy and while there befriends an unusual couple. However I tired of the storyline and the constant philosophy, not helped by whole brain radiation I am sure, and so I often flicked past pages. The ending was very good though. Not sure I gave this my best shot.

Kamile Paskauskaite says

Loved how the author combined art and philosophy, yet remained relatable and applicable to today's world. Didn't want to put this book down and was quite sad when it ended.

James Robertson says

Humane, intelligent, beautifully written novel about love, life and death, with a distinctly philosophical tone.

Sandra says

I realised a couple of years ago that books with the word 'blue' in the title both exerted a strong pull on my consciousness and despite knowing nothing of the author, were frequently startlingly good. This was no exception, from the interest of its cover and title, through the information about fly-fishing, the much more fascinating discussions on the art of translation, and the intelligent, elegant and wise writing of Jennie Erdal, whose accounts of relationships were so very vivid and insightful. Sadly, it does seem to be her only novel.

Vicky says

I expected much more from this book. The part on David Hume and philosophy was interesting but all the characters were so gloomy, pessimistic and miserable. The "disease of the learned" is a mind problem and paints everything in grey colours. Each life in the story is lost, unhappy and without future. I definitely need to read now something more uplifting.

Ms.pegasus says

This is a puzzling book; not a traditional mystery at all, despite the promise of the sub-title (A PHILOSOPHICAL MYSTERY). The eponymous "missing shade of blue" is derived from David Hume's proposition: Knowing all colors EXCEPT a particular shade of blue, could a person then rely on imagination rather than direct experience in order to conjure an apprehension of that missing shade in his mind? (Hume

believed the answer was 'yes'). Substitute love for blue in this paradigm and that is the central puzzle of the story.

The proposition is explored through 3 main characters: A French translator sojourning in Edinburgh in order to translate David Hume's original manuscripts into French, a Scottish professor of philosophy and his wife, a painter. The professor, Sanderson, is the most interesting of the three. He's a dedicated atheist who has lost his passion for wife, teaching, and the study of philosophy. His rigorous pursuit of rationality seems to imply that his sense of humanity has reached a post-modern dead-end. Ironically, he is now writing an academic treatise on "happiness" in order to satisfy the college's demand for published research. Writing the book has only served to accentuate his sense of futility, an emotion that reverberates as he considers the translator's innocent query: Does philosophy invite unhappy people or do people become unhappy by studying philosophy? Sanderson's unhappiness is reflected in innumerable ways. He suspects his wife is having an affair; what remains of his love for her cannot bring him happiness; his own lover – a passionless sexual coupling – has just jilted him; his body is disintegrating from a virulently disfiguring eczema; and he consciously walls himself off from all intimate contact, refusing to form a connection to his mentally afflicted stepson Alfie. As the story progresses, so does his disintegration. His parsing of happiness, eudaimonia (the Greek idea of "living well"), and ataraxia (the Greek idea of imperturbability [harmony?]) has left him with an emptiness as if to say: Is this all there is? For the reader, his seemingly self-imposed solitude may not be a choice but a consequence of his inability to experience happiness.

The translator experiences the same paradoxes in his repressed exploration of love. His first person narrative is an introspective examination of the ambivalent attachments in his life: Devotion to his fragile mother, affection and admiration rather than passion for a female acquaintance; commitment to telling a dead philosopher's story rather than discovering his own; fearfully insulating himself from the recurrence of a violent anxiety attack he experienced as a student; the many unspoken connections he felt for his alienated father. For much of the narrative, we see him as if he were looking in on the human drama through a window, trying to apply reason to guide his interpretations. Is reason enough of a grounding to infer the recognition of love?

The wife is viewed as the modality of instinctiveness. Her paintings reflect a sense of vitality, animal frankness, and diminishment – the tide of joy and expectation now ebbing. But there is rhythm and life even in that aspect of receding. *"Carrie was concerned with the sort of space where you would expect to see someone – it could be a room, a bed, a street – and it was this space that held the absence of a figure."* Another philosophical conundrum waiting in the wings – can we know happiness without knowing sadness, or pleasure without pain? To what degree is experience defined by its opposite?

The author circumvents the issue of substituting religion in place of empiricism – the very issue Hume sought to expel. At various points, each of the characters distinguishes between religion as an experience, and religion as a rational construct designed to alleviate fear or "make us feel better." Sanderson, at one point, even likens religion to a filter – forcing experience into a predefined interpretation, a mental straight-jacket.

These three strands are tied together quite neatly. We see Sanderson at his most honest when he is connected to nature – standing in the rushing stream, fly fishing. The story concludes with the translator's sense of epiphany. He loses and only later recovers his translations of 3 essays. In the interim he re-translates the essays. It's an interim that contains a series of fateful events. The translations done before this experience bears no resemblance to the ones done later – the translator's life has been so greatly changed: *"They [the old versions] were so unlike the new versions that they might have been done by a different translator, a different person. Which, in a sense, was the case."*

The main attraction of this difficult book is its disciplined prose: The fiction rather than the philosophy. The translator's dedication to his craft is described as a transcendental labor. Each of the characters is given a unique voice, a clear viewpoint. The writing is beautiful in its indirectness: The translator recalls the permanent sadness of his mother: *"For much of my childhood my mother had been wrapped in a cocoon of unwellness that was hard to enter. But children take love wherever they can find it – that is what I came to believe – and I managed to find love also in my mother, albeit in homeopathic dilution."*

I must admit, I'm fascinated by attempts to link philosophy and fiction even though the area takes me outside my "comfort zone." I'm not well-read in philosophy but enjoy the piece-meal introduction such works of fiction afford. On the other hand, it's a different kind of fiction, a type that's not easily accessible to emotions. It's this ambivalence that once more leads me to a 3 star rating.

Sarah Puentes says

Are you interested in philosophy and translation? Do you like a good hint of mystery in the plot with some speculation on defining the truth and reality? If so, you will like this book.

It doesn't work that well as a 'novel', too confused with theory, plot, sub plot and some more uncharted theoretical territory unrelated to the outset, BUT not bad if the subject matter interests you.

Athena says

It was the title that made me pick up this book off the shelf in the library. The Missing Shade of Blue refers to David Hume's thesis, or rather objection to his thesis, that simple ideas are derived from corresponding simple impressions. But Hume also argues that under certain conditions it seems possible that an idea can emerge without being caused by an impression. We can imagine a purple horse without having seen one. As he describes in the 'missing shade of blue' thought experiment

"Suppose, therefore, a person to have enjoyed his sight for thirty years, and to have become perfectly acquainted with colours of all kinds except one particular shade of blue, for instance, which it never has been his fortune to meet with. Let all the different shades of that colour, except that single one, be placed before him, descending gradually from the deepest to the lightest; it is plain that he will perceive a blank, where that shade is wanting, and will be sensible that there is a greater distance in that place between the contiguous colours than in any other. Now I ask, whether it be possible for him, from his own imagination, to supply this deficiency, and raise up to himself the idea of that particular shade, though it had never been conveyed to him by his senses? I believe there are few but will be of opinion that he can: and this may serve as a proof that the simple ideas are not always, in every instance, derived from the correspondent impressions; though this instance is so singular, that it is scarcely worth our observing, and does not merit that for it alone we should alter our general maxim."

Jennie Erdal's book , "The Missing Shade of Blue. A philosophical mystery" refers to our ability to make sense of something that we have not experienced. Happiness, perhaps! It is a book about the dangers and the delights of philosophy which as Carrie (one of the characters in the story) warns, it can "seriously damage your heart". It is about love and death "the principal concerns in most people's lives." It is also a book a

about language and fly-fishing. A gripping story, beautifully written.

Allenylson Ferreira says

A autora criou personagens complexos, todos levam consigo a marca do sofrimento iminente ao ser-humano, e isso faz deles mais humanos e mais próximos de nós. É como se estivéssemos lendo algo sobre pessoas que conhecêssemos, e isso é muito bom. Identifiquei-me imediatamente com Eddie, não vou me estender nesse assunto, pois seria um tanto pessoal demais. Jennie Erdal despiu os personagens ao desenvolver da história, mostrando suas marcas na alma que os fazem desacreditar em algo como a felicidade, que os fazem se perguntar sobre a vida e a morte. E vemos que Eddie, Carrie, Harry, Alfie e outros personagens tem um pouco de nós, um pouco de nossas dúvidas, um pouco de nossa tristeza, um pouco da nossa vida. É um livro que nos fazem enxergar esse tom ausente de azul.

Lauren Albert says

While I love novels made up almost entirely of dialogue (internal and external) particularly those of a philosophical persuasion, I realize that such novels are not everyone's cup of tea. So, I would steer those looking for activity or events in a book away from *The Missing Shade of Blue*. Those of you who like to (over)hear people thinking or having philosophical conversations, run to your bookstore (online or off).

Ajporter says

This is an exceptional book and a wonderful literary achievement.

Erdal's prose is mesmerising and as such she successfully creates an enjoyable novel covering many themes: love, loss, death, mourning, life, happiness, philosophy, psychiatry, the French language to name but a few. Indeed, her ability to incorporate French words and phrases into her narrative is a joy to behold. This is fitting given her narrator is a native French translator. As a university student studying French and German I can relate to Erdal's understanding and portrayal of translation and the issues surrounding this art form.

Furthermore, Jennie Erdal incorporates philosophy and philosophical issues into her book with superb clarity giving so much attention to detail. This brings the reader closer to her characters and, as fellow human beings, makes the reader able to resonate with Erdal's messages and characterisations.

'The Missing Shade of Blue' centres around Edgar Logan, her translator-narrator, who comes to Edinburgh from Paris in order to study and translate the works of David Hume. In so doing, he meets Dr Harry Sanderson, a university philosophy lecturer, and his wife Carrie. These new acquaintances take Edgar on a rollercoaster of a journey with many differing emotions all of which the reader can relate to and understand as the overarching theme of striving for happiness is brought to light.

As someone interested in mental health and philosophy this book suited me, especially as it deals with the French language given my personal background, but I would recommend this novel to anyone who would like to read an outstanding, well-crafted, slow-burning love story as well as to those who also have a passion for philosophical and linguistic concepts as we try to make sense of the world and the true meanings of life

itself.

j andrews says

Wee, interesting snippets about philosophy and language throughout.
