



# Crossing Washington Square

*Joanne Rendell*

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**A story of two strong-willed and passionate women who are compelled to unite their senses and sensibilities, from the author of *The Professors? Wives? Club*.**

Professor Diana Monroe is a highly respected scholar of Sylvia Plath. Serious and aloof, she steadfastly keeps her mind on track. Professor Rachel Grey is young and impulsive, with a penchant for teaching relevant contemporary women's stories like *Bridget Jones? Diary* and *The Devil Wears Prada*, and for wearing her heart on her sleeve.

The two conflicting personalities meet head-to-heart when Carson McEvoy, a handsome and brilliant professor visiting from Harvard, sets his eyes on *both* women and creates even more tension between them. Now Diana and Rachel are slated to accompany an undergraduate trip to London, where an almost life-threatening experience with a student celebrity will force them to change their minds and heal their hearts?together.

## Crossing Washington Square Details

Date : Published September 1st 2009 by Berkley Books (first published July 23rd 2009)

ISBN : 9780451227843

Author : Joanne Rendell

Format : Paperback 310 pages

Genre : Fiction, Womens Fiction, Chick Lit, Romance

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# From Reader Review Crossing Washington Square for online ebook

## Elizabeth Sulzby says

The premise of the book is good. A tenured female English professor dislikes a new untenured, tenure track female English professor. Current theories of feminism, literary theory, genderism, class distinctions are mentioned as important to the young woman. Both have men problems and some of these overlap with an unbelievably handsome sexy visiting professor from Harvard (which the author says is a type she has never met). Said hunk has affairs with tons of women but important to this book is his affair with a fragile 19 year old daughter of a multimillionaire who has promised to give a humongous endowment to "Manhattan University," a stand in for NYU. Arguments about whether chick lit is/can be literature and can be in "dialogue with" classics such as Austen and Woolf. Alas, for me the book was written in a somewhat trite fashion--very predictable.

Mostly all ends well and both women have "good" men in their lives, more or less, and have given up on the weak men they were drawn to before. Undergraduate student ends up in good shape; endowment is saved. Women profs get their hands slapped gently by a FEMALE dean, not of their dept for of their overarching dept. That one slipped by without a comment by the author.

Duh, all in all, for me.

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## Nancy says

I expected to like this more because it's set in an academic environment, but it's a very cliché romance - I can't tell if that's its point because one of the two female professors argues that contemporary popular fiction is legitimate literature. The other one despises Harlequin romances for being full of adverbs, yet the author describes her characters as "devilishly handsome" and "breathtakingly beautiful." Characters who are devilishly and/or breathtakingly attractive aren't all that interesting to me.

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## Bonnie says

Joanne Rendell, author of *The Professors' Wives Club* takes readers back to the fictional university of Manhattan U in her second novel *Crossing Washington Square*. This is not a sequel but a stand alone novel that follows two strong, independent and highly different professors, Rachel and Diana. Diana is highly respected, serious, and gives off an air of superiority but poise and grace to those around her. Her main scholarly interest is in Sylvia Path's writings and she has a comfort and ease with students. Rachel is young, passionate, emotional and less experienced as a professor. Her scholarly interests are in contemporary women's fiction and how they relate to classics such as how Jane Austen's books relates to *Bridget Jones Diary* and *The Devil Wears Prada*. The two women have differing viewpoints as to the relevance and importance of popular women's fiction compared to literary fiction. I found this theme of contention between Rachel and Diana's views of literature relevant today as there are differing viewpoints among many readers as to the value of "chick lit" vs. "women's fiction" vs. "literary fiction" and "classics". Ms. Rendell's writing challenges the reader to analyze these differences and points out that there is much more substance and relevance to the lighter chick lit or women's fiction novels than what appears in a title or a cover.

As a reader, we get a glimpse into academic life among the departmental politics and relationships between professors as peers and between professors and their students. We get to see two strong female academic professors grow and develop and challenge their own core beliefs about literature and how to present their differing views in an academic setting with respect. There's also a little spice added to the story as Diana and Rachel are both attracted to the same man who appears quite handsome and alluring to them both. This adds some fun twists to the storyline.

Crossing Washington Square was an enjoyable novel to read that truly exemplifies women's fiction. It has strong characters, a story that challenges you to think about popular vs. literary fiction in a way that is fun and entertaining. I found these discussions some of the most enjoyable parts of the book as they made me think about differing viewpoints about literature and preconceived notions about genres. As readers, we can miss out on a vast amount of worthwhile books if we write off a whole genre (such as chick lit) without judging it for ourselves and being open minded.

Crossing Washington Square would be a fabulous choice for a book club as it would facilitate great discussions about popular vs. literary fiction, academics, women's dynamics and relationships in the work environment, college students, life as a professor etc. There is a list of discussion questions at the back of the book as well as a conversation with the author.

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### **Isabella says**

Beautifully written. You can't help but fall in love with Diana and Rachel. Their interactions are at times comical and at times heartwarming. Their interactions can also make you cringe and want to make you yell out, "Why? Oh why did you do that?" Although, I would have liked to see more of Rachel and Peter's story. The foreshadowing at Rachel's party was very good, but then there is only a slight mention of it in the last chapter. I would have liked to see more of how they interact.

Overall, this is a great book and should be read especially by those who love literature. I highly recommend it.

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### **Jackie Jameson says**

I gave this novel 5 stars because it was so much more than a typical chick lit novel. I was really impressed by references to Jane Austen, the Howard Duffy lobotomy, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, and the novel "The Bell Jar." The author has a PHD in literature and it shows, but incorporates all the charm of a modern day "Bridget Jones Diary". That accomplishment in and of itself is the central theme of the novel, and how women should and can work together and support each other in a male dominated field. A truly feminist novel and a lot of fun.

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### **Christy says**

In a nutshell:

Established professor, Diane Monroe and younger 'rising star' professor Rachel Grey, find themselves in a territorial battle, especially as they hold opposing views on the place of women's fiction / chick lit in the

pedagogical canon. Both of them are also in complicated romantic entanglements as well. Things come to a head when they both accompany a study abroad group to London.

#### Review:

I was interested in this book because I worked in higher education (specifically student affairs) for several years. Although the book did give some shout-outs to academic commonplaces such as bored undergraduates, listservs and The Chronicle of Higher Education, I actually did not find much recognizable in the setting overall. I have never been a professor so that accounts for some of it.

But then, some of the professors' decisions had me scratching my head. At one point Rachel becomes the faculty advisor to a graduate student, only a week before the student presents at a seminar. The hand-off is done in a most casual fashion. At least in the graduate programs I knew, a first year tenure-track professor would not be assigned as the faculty advisor to a doctoral student. Also it seemed very ill-advised to have the student switch advisors right before a major presentation. My reaction to this plot point certainly showed that my student affairs instincts are still alive and well!

But my credulity was stretched by other aspects of the novel too. Rachel Grey (deliberately written as a modern-day version of Marianne Dashwood) and Diana Monroe were not real to me as people. Their character development happened abruptly. Changes and epiphanies were laid out clearly and dully to the reader. Resolutions to the characters' problems come about too neatly. The literary discussion central to the novel seemed lacking in real depth.

Most annoying of all, however, was the fact that both Rachel and Diana spent most of their time mulling over and obsessing about the men in their lives (both of them have exes, plus two additional men).

One part that I did appreciate was when a stranger listens to Rachel's anxieties about her love life and her career, and the stranger points out that Rachel should not see herself as a failure, as she is a full-time professor at a respected university. I appreciated the nod to Rachel's privilege. Rachel was extremely lucky to have snagged a job as a tenure-track literature professor. Most of her peers are probably either running the adjunct circuit or have given up on working in academia altogether.

Anyway, I finished it because I owned it, but I would have abandoned it otherwise. Others have liked it, so it might be it just wasn't up my alley and also that I went in with my particular views on what academia is like. I still want to read a good fiction book from the perspective of administrators or professors in academia, but I think I want one that's more messy, where the complicated issues of academia are not as glossed over, as I felt they were in *Crossing Washington Square*.

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#### **Jane Stewart says**

Interesting characters. Talented author with a good writing style. Good debate about popular fiction vs. classic literature.

#### STORY BRIEF:

The main characters are literature professors. Rachel is 31. Her specialty is contemporary fiction including romance novels and chick lit. She has just been hired to teach at (fictional) Manhattan University. She is frustrated with apathetic students and lack of friendship and respect from her peers (other professors). Rachel broke up with her boyfriend before coming to New York. She is energetic, passionate, and shows her

feelings.

Diana is 41. Her husband Graham left her five years ago for a younger woman. She has been seeing Mikey who is a computer technician at the university. Mikey adores her. Diana is embarrassed to have a relationship with him. She is a tenured professor specializing in the poet Sylvia Plath. She looks down her nose at romance novels calling them “soft porn for desperate housewives, poorly written, littered with adverbs, and recycled trite stories about heroines swooning over devilishly handsome men.” From the beginning she dislikes Rachel who reminds her of the woman who stole her husband. Diana criticizes Rachel in front of others. Diana is rigid and respected by her peers. She is also loved by her students.

Carson is a visiting professor from Harvard, spending one term at Manhattan University. He is extremely handsome and independently wealthy. He is a big flirt – with both Diana and Rachel. Rachel would love to have a relationship with him. He and Diana were friends years ago when they were students together.

#### REVIEWER’S OPINION:

I’m a lover of romance novels, so my opinion comes from that angle. This was a good story. The characters were well done. I enjoyed the debates and discussions about romance novels vs. classic literature. I liked Rachel’s definition of chick lit as “popular women’s fiction...fiction by women, about women, and for women.” The best part was seeing how the conflicts and dislike between the two women changed. I liked the happy endings for both Diana and Rachel. There were a few books mentioned by the characters that I plan to read. The author writes well which makes sense since she has a PhD in English literature. Whether you like the plot or not, she brings the characters to life and tells the story in an engaging way.

At the end of the book is a four-page “Conversation With Joanne Rendell” – very worthwhile. She talks more about the debate between the study of the classics and “high” literature vs. popular fiction. She talks about other things as well.

#### REVIEWER’S OPINION ABOUT ADVERBS:

The character Diana criticized romance novels as being “littered with adverbs.” A few times I’ve heard other fiction authors talk about cutting adverbs from their writing which mystifies me. I didn’t notice many adverbs in this book, so I’m guessing the author made an effort to avoid them or to remove them. By cutting adverbs she ends up with something that feels more cerebral and less emotionally engaging. Three top selling authors come to mind who use adverbs “a lot.” The number one selling fiction author “in the world” is JK Rowling. John Grisham is a top selling author for legal/crime suspense. Georgette Heyer is a top selling romance author. Following are some examples from their novels that show how engaging and descriptive adverbs can be.

From Rowling’s first Harry Potter book: whispering excitedly, eyed them angrily, acting oddly today, fell asleep quickly, appeared so suddenly and silently.

From Grisham’s “The Client:” the passenger door suddenly flew open, slowly looked at Ricky, he exhaled calmly, Mark carefully picked a cigarette from his shirt pocket, Mark suddenly remembered.

From Heyer’s “Venetia:” she added shyly smiling, clasping her hands loosely in her lap, fanned herself idly, he surveyed his youthful foe sardonically, an oddly disquieting smile in his eyes, he was still smiling but not pleasantly.

I don’t know who is telling authors to cut adverbs, but I wish they would stop. The public obviously loves adverbs because that’s what they buy. I wonder what this author would be like if she used more adverbs the

way these other authors do.

#### OTHER BOOKS:

To date this author has written three books. My ratings are:

4 stars. The Professors' Wives' Club. Copyright 2008

4 stars. Crossing Washington Square. Copyright 2009

(to read soon) Out of the Shadows. Copyright: 2010

#### DATA:

Story length: 308 pages. Swearing language: strong, including religious swear words. Sexual language: none. Number of sex scenes: maybe two or three, but they are referred to not shown. Setting: current day New York City, NY, London and a small town in England. Copyright: 2009. Genre: women's relationship fiction, chick lit.

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#### **Pam says**

she was trying a little too hard. wanted to make the point that the canon is not the only thing we should read & that's there's merit in chick lit & even romance novels. i agree w/the premise (well, i think romance novels are like mocha flavor, just not for me & very addicting). but her story had too many trite coincidences & u could see how it would end up coming a mile away. that's like the last several books i have read. i get mad when they don't end like i want (Jodi Picoult) but i feel cheated or something when it's all tied up in a nice bow.

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#### **Jenny says**

This second novel by Joanne Rendell, Crossing Washington Square, was such an enjoyable and smart read. I flew through the book, and it truly reminded me of why I love contemporary women's fiction so much! It did this not just because I loved this book itself but also because of the interesting discussions about contemporary fiction that take place within the story.

The two main characters are each female literature professors, at the fictitious Manhattan U, who are on opposite ends of the literary spectrum. Rachel Grey is a young, animated professor still working towards tenure. Her recently published book explored the relationship between the work of Jane Austen and contemporary women's fiction. Diana Monroe, on the other hand, is more serious, already tenured, and studies the works of Sylvia Plath. She and Rachel immediately dislike each other and maintain a tense relationship. The tension is further heightened when a charming and attractive visiting professor from Harvard arrives and gives both Rachel and Diana flattering attention. Then, without realizing the other is going, Rachel and Diana each volunteer to chaperone a study abroad trip to London. While there they are confronted with a situation with one of their students in which they have to work together and end up learning a lot more about the other.

My thoughts on this book can be described perfectly by the quote by Nicole Kraus on the cover of the book: "A charming, witty, and cerebral novel." This novel was fun, engaging, and smart. Each of the characters, despite their differences, was easily relatable. They each experience some of their own struggles, but they were great examples of strong, confident women and left me feeling empowered as a woman as well. I love

when, while reading, I feel like I am cheering on the characters. These are some of the wonderful things about women's literature and are also discussed in the book; Rachel and Diana get into heated debates about the merits of popular women's fiction and these are some of the arguments Rachel gives. These discussions also piqued my interest in the subject and reinforced my desire to take a class in literature.

For those who enjoy popular women's fiction, Jane Austen, books about colleges or professors, or even just discussions about books in general, this novel is a gem. The plot was well paced and continuously moved forward, engaging the reader throughout. The setting is the same as in Rendell's first novel, *The Professor's Wives' Club*, and a couple characters from that book are mentioned in passing, but this is a stand-alone novel.

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### **Knotty says**

Let me say how disappointed I was in this book. First of all, I was interested to read about two women working in academia at fictional Manhattan U. The main protagonist, Rachel, is a new Assistant Professor who focuses on literature and how chick lit in today's culture is actually hidden scholarship. Sure, ummm ok. I read chick-lit every once in a while, but I think that assumption is a stretch. Then there is Diana who is from England, is from a poor yet hard-working back ground, and is extremely snobby. She of course specializes in Sylvia Plath, so I knew right there this character was going to be hum-drum and depressing. Add in the perfect male figures to round out the romance, deception, and "does he like me, that handsome devil?" and you have half of this book. The main focus of the book is that these two women unnaturally despise each other and are thrust into going on a study abroad trip with a handful of students to London. As the trip progresses, you can only just read and imagine how these characters would constantly get fired over their terrible and rude decisions. No, I don't live in a world without rules, and I doubt these characters do too. Ridiculous. I did enjoy one part of the book believe it or not. Even though this is somewhat of a modern-day *Sense and Sensibility*, this book clarified the main focus of chick-lit. Almost every single chick-lit book is based on a formula that comes from literature. Most chick-lit books are *Pride and Prejudice* over and over. Every once in a while you get a hint of *Emma*, but usually your protagonist is a strong woman who is desperately looking for love and eventually finds it. The man will not discipline or control her, but instead love and cherish her and not have her change to be with him. Well, most of the chick lit books try to do this.

Anyway, I got this book on sale, so I wouldn't really recommend it. Too much needy women syndrome and not enough "I am woman, hear me roar!"

Jen's Rating: \*\*

And yes, one major reason I read this book is because the main character's name is Rachel Grey. If you don't know what this means, then keep walking.

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### **Melanie says**

A hoot! Really well-written, funny, with digs at academe, and three love stories, including the awkward relationship between two very different but similarly-vulnerable women.

The premise of the novel highlights one of my soapbox issues: intellectual snobbery, especially at the



expense of scholars (and ordinary folks) who take popular culture seriously. Rachel is a young scholar whose unexpected bestseller on popular women's fiction has earned her an invitation to teach at a prestigious Manhattan college. (Think Camille Paglia, younger and cuter, and definitely less frenetic.) Diana is a Plath scholar whose disdain for Rachel's specialty extends to Rachel herself.

Throw in celebrity twins, a Dylan Thomas-Ted Hughes womanizer, a trip to London, and truly-evocative descriptions of interiors (apartments, an airplane, an academic conference room) that utterly remove the distance between reader and story, and you have a very enjoyable read, indeed!

(My only regret? Alas, Rachel's book is not, ahem, in print. I'm sure I'd love it.)

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### **Sandy Forman-Johnson says**

slow in the beginning but then it started to move

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### **Sherry says**

I enjoyed this book. It's a very comforting read. Rendell's new approach to chick lit to focus on a relationship between two women is very refreshing. She uses a rather standard romance structure of "oil and water" characters and applies it to a friendship between two women. The relationships they have with their men takes a back seat.

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### **Christy says**

Meh. It was ok, but I almost feel like the writing was intentionally less than it could have been in an effort to not be "literature." There is so much focus on "literature" v. mass market fiction that it could go either way - if it wasn't intentional then it just wasn't very well-written. (Or perhaps if it had had more editing.) I don't know, I'm neither a writer, nor an editor. The writing just wasn't that good.

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### **Erin says**

I heard about this book during Book Blogger Appreciation Week and it sounded right up my alley. I've always been discouraged by the dismissal of chick lit as "real literature" and think it has certain merit in the world of fiction.

Crossing Washington Square makes a lot of really great points about the misconceptions about chick lit and the prejudices people have when they see you reading it. However, by about halfway through I was just like "I get it. Enough already!" The "moral" is dragged out way too long and both Diana and Rachel lack any self-awareness so it takes forever for them to make any ground as characters.

Read all of my review at [Lit Snit](#)

