



The Beautiful Visit

Elizabeth Jane Howard

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On the eve of an unusual voyage, a young woman reviews her life. Her story begins with a 'beautiful visit' to friends in the country which serves as an awakening experience. What follows is an account of her struggle to retain the mood of her visit.

The Beautiful Visit Details

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Lara says

An intricately observed story about a young girl coming of age during the First World War. I liked the heroine; she is serious, intelligent and hungry for more than her sheltered upbringing has thus far offered her. Having received no formal education and been raised with no greater aim in life than to marry suitably, she struggles to find an outlet for her ambitions. Howard's writing is suffused with a gentle humour and full of wry observations that Austen would have been proud of. "It is simply that life stops when one is married, and one ought to take care that it stops in a very good place." I'm looking forward to reading more.

Esdaile says

As I started this novel I was thinking of awarding it just two stars, which changed to three and finally here are four. The strength is the overwhelming acuteness and vividness of observation. There is no hesitation or distraction here. Everything strikes the reader as being "entirely as it must have been". All writing is biographical to a greater or lesser extent, this very much to a greater extent, but the force of the narrative does not let up as so many biographical accounts may be expected to do as people lose a perspective of what is more or less important to the structure of the whole. Perhaps only the ending is a little vague and up-in-the-air to be entirely satisfying but as the depiction of a world before the Great Insanity of 1914-1918 and then damaged England after, this book is a little gem. I am however, bewildered by the comment on the back cover of the Penguin edition from Antonia White writing in The New Statesman writing that EJ Howard has "true imagination." Apart from the obvious question (what is "untrue imagination"?) I cannot think of a more inappropriate comment. The one quality which this writer surely does not possess or if you will, does not need to possess, is imagination. This is a closely observed record of the author's life. In fact, a character comments at one point to the narrator that women writers do not have imagination -their strength lying in the power of accurate observation. That does not apply to all women writers (Wuthering Heights!) but it is true in this case, that not imagination of which there is none that I can see, gives this novel its quality but an awesome ability to observe, an ability characterised in "The Beautiful Visit" by acuteness, precision, honesty, accuracy, insight and intelligence.

Kirsty says

I was disappointed with this book. I just got a bit fed up with the main character I think. And I've completely forgotten her name, so clearly she made a huge impression on me!

I loved Howard's books about the Cazelets - she writes so beautifully and with such fluidity - but I just didn't care much about this person. Or any of the other's for that matter. The main character reminded me a little of Bella in Twilight actually. Which I realise is a scandalous comparison! It was just the way she obsessed over things so much. I did like her to begin with - she reminded me of myself at the age of 16, with her worries and desire for an exciting life - but she really got a bit tiresome after a while.

I suppose also, that there wasn't much of a story here, like there is with the Cazelets. Or perhaps it is that with them, you get everyone's different perspective, whereas with this book, it is all written by the main

character. I don't know. I just got a bit fed up with it all towards the end.

Kathryn E Hagen says

Unusual. I thought the ending was odd. I read the book because I'd read that Howard was Hilary Mantel's favorite author. I'm reading another of Howard's books now.

Lizzie says

She died recently; I read her Cazalet Chronicles a few years ago and loved them, and didn't realize till I read the obits that there's a new book in the series. I'd had this one, unread, so it appealed. It's her first book, a memoir by a young girl in the years before and after World War I. I liked it a lot; she's good at describing thought processes and feelings. Framing the story is a visit she makes to some happy and glamorous cousins, which makes her question her own life and seek more, and another visit years later. There are some odd and memorable characters that she meets along the way, and she succeeds in conveying some of the horrors of WWI with deftness.

It has a few first-book problems with a rather unbelievable love affair but what the hell, it's sweet and moving even if it strained credulity. There were a couple of superb moments that made me put it down to think for a bit, which I love.

Becky says

What can I say about Elizabeth Jane Howard. She's a great writer.

Beth Bonini says

In Artemis Cooper's recently published (2016) biography of Elizabeth Jane Howard, she says The Beautiful Visit "grew out of the unhappiness of Jane's first marriage, and it asks the questions that were preoccupying her then. How do women find a place in the world if they are brought up unprepared and uneducated for anything but marriage? Does coupledom really bring fulfilment? Is it possible to find an identity outside it?"

The book is very much a coming-of-age story about a young girl - never named - who is the youngest of four children in a 'shabby genteel' family. Her mother comes from a rich family; her father from a lesser social class, and these are the things that have always mattered so much in England. There is a strain, and a shame, in the family which suffuses the atmosphere completely. Her father is a composer (not quite first-rate) and the family lives in a house in Kensington that they cannot afford to maintain properly. EJH is very attuned to the nuances and gradations of social class, and one of the themes of the book is that women from 'good' families are not allowed to do very much at all other than make good marriages. The book is set just before, during and after World War I - a time that instigated great social change in England, and also (not unrelatedly) wiped out a large part of a generation of men. For those girls bred for well-connected marriage,

the opportunities became more limited than ever.

The details and atmosphere of this novel are so spot-on, so precise - and it really does allow the reader to imaginatively enter that world. The oppressive rules applied to women are so hard to imagine now, but it's worth remembering that women still did not have the vote in England. (Partial voting rights for women were granted in 1918, and more comprehensive rights were not passed by law until 1928).

Bored to the point of despondency, the young protagonist of the book is invited to visit some distant relatives of her mother's for the Christmas holidays: two weeks in the holiday at a 'jolly' country house with a large family and interesting, attractive guests. The repercussions of this visit then play out through the rest of the novel. There are several important encounters with young men, her mother and her sister, but this is a largely internalised novel. She is a quiet observer, more than a primary mover in life - because of sex, age and temperament. It is quite hypnotic to read; at least I found it so.

Like EJH, her protagonist longs for something more than just marriage. The example of her parents' marriage has not been a positive one, and the sensitive, observant young girl sees how men and women all around her are constantly misunderstanding and disappointing each other. This is the opposite of a 'marriage plot' novel, really, because it is really about exploring about what else is available other than the marriage plot. My only disappointment was with the ending - which felt both strained and improbable. Otherwise, I thought this novel was full of emotional power.

Kellie Marnoch says

This is very much a first book - though a first book by a truly great author.

Lwg says

I really didn't know what to make of this. I usually love novels about the early development of a woman writer, but although I kept reading this one and didn't get bored, I just found the main character to be pretty tedious

Elizabeth says

I always like Ms. Howard's style of writing.

This book was no exception.

A very lonely girl who grew up so protected that she has no clue about real life.

An unexpected visit to the country house of distant friends is an eye opener for her.

Unfortunately she was only asked to join to make up numbers and she did not know anybody there.

Veronica says

So after enjoying the Cazalets so much I decided to read a few other EJH novels. This is her first, and has some first novel traits. She's already developed that talent for detailed description and atmosphere, taking you right into the room with her characters. And she already loves writing affectionately about children. It's an odd kind of mixture though. The first section reminded me very much of Rosalind Lehmann's *Invitation to the Waltz* as our naive unnamed heroine makes her first visit to a house party and dance. Then there's a section where she's channeling Daphne du Maurier in *Rebecca*; our still-unnamed narrator is a lady's companion in a creepy house in the country. This part ends for no particular reason, without really going anywhere. Then there's a rather twee and implausible love affair against the background of WW1. Thereafter the story drifts along; at one point I thought it would be neatly bookended with another visit to the Lancings; but it carries on afterwards, and the ending is, well, a bit silly. The whole thing could have been trimmed quite radically.

I'm not put off her by this; her mature work is much better. And it does have its moments, mostly in the first half, and especially the first visit. I'm left wondering why she decided not to name the narrator or her sister, going out of her way to achieve it -- perhaps an indication that they are nonentities? Why did the brothers, who scarcely appear, merit names though?

Edit: this review is a good summary of the social issues EJH illuminates in this book, that I haven't addressed here.

Nora says

Brilliant. Hard to believe it's a first novel. So happy to have found EJH.

Jane says

it's lovely to read the first book of a writer who grows up to be so great. all the greatness is hidden in among the kinds of ridiculous ploys a crummy writer (like, say, me) would use. you just want to rumple the author's cute little head.

Jane Gregg says

It's amazing that this is the first novel of a young woman who had received really very little education. It goes deeply into the making of the human mind, and examines its small, quiet, desperate corners.

Edna says

Some wonderful descriptions. Rather old fashioned and charming. I liked.

