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The Watch Tower

Elizabeth Harrower, Joan London (Introduction)

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After Laura and Clare are abandoned by their mother, Felix is there to help, even to marry Laura if she will have him. Little by little the two sisters grow complicit with his obsessions, his cruelty, his need to control.

Set in the leafy northern suburbs of Sydney during the 1940's, *The Watch Tower* is a novel of relentless and acute psychological power.

The Watch Tower Details

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From Reader Review The Watch Tower for online ebook

Carolyn says

It was interesting reading this Aussie classic written in the 1960s and set at the start of WWII through to the 1940s. The lives and expectations of women were so different at that time so the novel must be read with that in mind.

Laura and Clare Vaizey are happy at their Sydney boarding school when their father dies suddenly and their lives change forever. Fifteen year old Laura had wanted to finish school and study medicine (or become an opera singer) but their cold, unfeeling mother pulls them out of school and sends Laura to secretarial college and Clare to the local school. Laura is also told she must clean and cook and take care of Clare while her mother languishes in bed reading magazines and occasionally going out to bridge. After secretarial school Laura is sent out to work to support the family and finds a job locally with a man called Felix Shaw. When the girls' mother absconds with a man to England just before the start of WWII, Laura and Clare are left to fend for themselves and Laura feels she has no option but to take up Felix's offer to marry her and keep Clare at school. But Felix is not the quiet, gentle, generous man he seems to be, especially when he has been drinking. He plays mind games with the girls and subjects Laura to psychological torture as well as verbal abuse and violence in the form of rages, destroying china and furniture. There are also hints of physical abuse, but mostly it seems to be his bitter and malicious mind that he likes to use to control others. Being 1966, when this was written, sex is never mentioned so we are not told if Felix's cruelty extended to the bedroom.

As Felix has no friends their lives are insular and lonely and revolves around working in Felix's various businesses and going for drives in Felix's car. Gradually over time Laura becomes worn down, and any spark she had of fun and vitality she once had is snuffed out. She spends all her time kowtowing to Felix and living in fear of his outbreaks. Clare fares somewhere better, eventually also attending secretarial school and breaking away to work outside Felix's business and making friends outside the home, but she also bends to Felix's will.

From our modern viewpoint it is difficult to see what these two women would subject themselves to the mental torture inflicted by this controlling man, but women had few options in those days and leaving home to live independently was not easy. It is not until a catalyst, in the form of a stranger coming into their lives, that events are set in motion that lead to Clare's escape.

This was not an enjoyable book to read as I did not like any of the characters however the writing is very sharp and clean and the tension is gradually built to a point where you can feel the girls holding their breath when they here Felix arrive home before they know what sort of mood he is in. It takes a lot of skill to depict a complex monster like Felix, occasionally kind and generous to strangers but with rage not far away. I felt very frustrated that neither Laura nor Clare were able to put up any resistance to the horrible man who controlled their lives and was appalled that he was able to get away with his behaviour. I was also shocked that neighbours, who would comment in the novel on the ruckus of loud voices and furniture being thrown next door, would just ignore it and not call the police not check that the women were okay. Although times have changed and women have more options today, unfortunately there are still women who do put up with men like Felix; those who drink and become violent, or subject women to physical or mental abuse, so it is a book that still resonates today.

James Tierney says

'(R)ead it as if it were a thriller, though no one is murdered. There is only...the death of a heart.' Joan London in the Text Classics Introduction of this brilliant novel.

Jennifer Mills says

Sharp study of suburban tyranny.

Helene Jeppesen says

3.5/5 stars.

This story is about Clare and Laura, two sisters who live in Sydney in the 1940s. Throughout their lives, they are forced to live with some miserable and horrible people, and even though it seems impossible, things keep getting worse for them.

HOWEVER, what I absolutely loved about this book is that this fatal destiny is highly underplayed. At no point does the author explicitly tell us what is going on. She hides the most cruel scenes in-between chapters about everyday life, and it's up to the reader to realise what is really going on without explicitly being told. I loved that!

These two sisters are quite ordinary and naive, and I didn't feel the deepest connection to them. Oftentimes, I felt like screaming at them because I became so frustrated with their lives and decisions. At the same time, I completely understood why they developed the way they did. It all made perfectly sense. I think that I would most likely be like them if I had gone through what they did. All they have is each other, and therefore they have to cling to each other as they grow up.

All in all, I think this is a beautiful story about what circumstances can do to you and your development in life. Had Clare and Laura grown up in completely different surroundings, I'm sure they would have been completely different characters. This story is filled with symbolism, and it has a beautiful, bittersweet ending. Still, in some way it didn't leave the biggest impression on me, which has made me reconsider my rating and change it from 4 to 3.5 stars.

Luke says

This isn't really a book I can say I enjoyed. It's masterfully written, yes, and lives up to the forgotten treasure billing Harrower's works have been given - but Jesus, it's a difficult thing to get through.

Set in '40s Sydney, it's a story of constriction. Two sisters are marooned by their couldn't-give-a-shit mother. An arranged marriage with an older man seals their fates, robbing them of educational opportunities and forcing them into servitude in the suburbs. Add in some on-again, off-again alcoholism and some domestic violence and misogyny and you've all the making of a Real Fun Time. Not.

Emptiness and inertia are key to the book. There's a distrust of the status quo, of commercialism and the

drive to have a family and keep a home, as well as a lamentation of the lack of individualism which seems to pervade the culture of ration books and black marketeering. In the city by the harbour, everyone seems a cut-out. This excerpt just about covers it:

They thought they knew what they were saying! They thought that what they said had meaning! Girls were bewitched by their own ability to curl their hair and embroider hideous daisies on hideous teacloths. Boys boasted because they could eat five potatoes with a roast dinner. Oh, accomplished! Oh, somnambulists! Silence, everyone!

Harrower's work is simply, evocatively presented. There's a breezy lightness to the prose - its descriptions of nature and of the joy of the ferry are pretty much second-to-none. But the subject matter almost outweighs the author's light touch. The spectre of domestic violence, the robbery of vitality and the struggle to escape the control of an older man wring out the reader as they do the sisters of the pages.

I'm very glad I read this, though I'm uncertain I'd re-read it. It's a bit like some of Christos Tsiolkas' work - you know it's important, you know it's wonderfully constructed, but it's a bit like spending time voluntarily robbing yourself of air with a plastic bag: unremittingly brutal. Even when there's not actual violence on the page, *The Watch Tower* slips in a couple of jabs to ensure you're paying attention.

It's great Text Publishing are keeping this work in print, and it's made me want to seek out more of Harrower's work. It's just something - like the film *The Boys* - that is almost better as an idea than it is to consume.

Justin Evans says

Listen to me: if you like Ferrante's Naples novels, go read this. Harrower's story is eerily similar. Harrower famously fell silent after writing a few novels. And nobody knows who 'Elena Ferrante' is, which makes me think... well, cue the conspiracy theories.

WT is about two sisters who struggle with the limited options available to them in war-time and post-war Australia. There is horrific domestic violence. There is generalized misogyny. One of the sisters gives in, one of them does not (lose the blood relationship, and doesn't this sound familiar, Elena?) All of this takes place is lovely, Jamesian prose, which lets Harrower lay out some great psychology:

"Looking into the intense darkness of Felix's gaze was not like looking into the eyes of an insane person, though the internal resistance was similar; yet it in no way resembled the experience of looking into the eyes of another nominally rational human being. His eyes were rather peep-holes through which a force could be glimpsed, primitive, chilling, subterranean beyond definition."

Though the sisters are great characters, this Felix gent is one of the great males of twentieth century literature: despite being utterly horrific, Harrower constantly makes her reader feel for him. It's clear he's at the mercy of this force within him, and the forces outside him as well. Of course, you don't feel for him that much. Mostly you just want him dead.

Susan says

excruciating but a must read

Jenny says

My 2 stars is for the story, not the author's technical skill, which is excellent. What I both didn't like and liked for different reasons was the omniscient narrator who reported everyone's feelings and motivations, often switching so quickly that I found myself flipping back to find out whose head I was in (never good). The upside is that the distance this form of narration creates meant I didn't become emotionally attached to either sister - a very good thing since their outwardly privileged lives were depressingly miserable. The brilliant dialogue and characterization didn't stop this chunk of life story from becoming tedious. I just wanted it to be over.

Barbara says

A very powerful book indeed. Like another I've read recently by an Australian woman writer - Burial Rites by Hannah Kent- I can't say I enjoyed it, rather I admired it.

The wonderfully-named Watchtower is a study in power relations, in what we would now call co-dependency , it is also a frightening reminder of just how vulnerable uneducated women of all classes, but perhaps particularly the middle classes with their need to stay genteel at all costs were, only such short time ago as the 1940's.

The protagonist's names rather intrigue me. Laura, with it's connotations of crowns and victories and success would seem to be as far removed from the tortured and beaten-down Laura of the book as possible, and yet she herself might disagree, seeing herself crowned as it were, with the victory of the beautiful house and garden and seemingly successful husband. Such is the power of the abuser to have the victim collude in her own degradation, to even see him as " poor Felix " .

Felix! Luckiness, and happiness! That terrible, damaging and damaged man. Felix is certainly portrayed as a man of extreme mental instability, but at the same time, supremely confident and egotistic. Harrower stops at the bedroom door - for which I am personally very grateful - but leaves us in no doubt of Felix' manic misogyny, his calling of women 'things', 'not fit to vomit on' and , most telling of all, Harrower mentions early on in the marriage, that Laura has read , and now understands, an anthropological article she once read about a tribe in which the men regard sex as the worst and most degrading act that can be visited upon anybody and treat women accordingly.

Clare - light and clarity , and perhaps even a connection with the moon, clair de lune ? She saves her sanity more that once by contemplation of the clear night skies and stars and moon.

So here they are, Felix the deranged and violent successful business man and apparent saviour , decades older than his wife Laura and her even younger sister Clare, both of who have been deserted by their father through death, and their mother through complete self centredness. It might be said that they are both

groomed for victimhood via their mother who, if not lying in bed smoking and being waited upon, is out playing cards and eventually simply deserts them to go back to her native England saying that that they will be all right as they have never known anything better. Clare is at this point fourteen years old.....

By the end of the novel, we understand that Clare may indeed come through into the light, that she at last sees herself as a person, a person moreover with something to offer others. (There is a hint of Christian redemption at this point that I found a bit jarring) For Laura there will be no such escape. Bound to Felix by myriad toxic strands she is leaving for South America with him, defending to the last this scheme as she has always defended his bad decisions, violence, alcoholic rages, incomprehensible cruelties, hugging the chains that bind her.

David Sarkies says

Another book from my English I reading list

28 April 2012

I read this book once for English I a long time ago (1996) and I am highly unlikely to read it again. In fact I no longer own a copy of this book, having passed it on to one of my friends who had enrolled in English I after me (though by that time the reading list had changed). I must say that there was something different between text books in High School and text books at university, namely in Highschool we did not have to purchase them. In fact, I am not sure if any other states (or countries) have a system like that where we borrow the text books for a year and then return them either when we have finished with them or we complete the course. However, with some English books, such as Hamlet, we don't need to borrow them, though I suspect that the editions that are recommended are because of the commentaries.

This book is set in Australia during World War Two when the protagonists flee England to live a more peaceful life elsewhere. At this time, as I mentioned in my previous commentary, war had ceased to be something that occurred at the fringes of the empire and had moved much closer to home. In fact, at that time, the enemy was pretty much breathing down the throat of the old empire. As such many people in England fled to safer parts of the empire, but even then, places like India, and even Australia, were feeling the pressure of enemies bearing down upon them.

However this book is not about war, or fleeing from war. The book takes place in a mansion in Sydney, and it is probably more about fleeing one horror, the horror of war, to another horror, the horror of being trapped. I can't remember much of the book beyond that, but I do remember that the lecturer talked about the horror of being trapped, of being imprisoned, with no way out. Look, this book did not draw me in all that much, but I guess the concept is a much better concept of horror than the typical slasher flicks that we see. They are not horror: rather they are designed to create a reaction with the overuse of blood and gore. However books are not visual, not in the same sense as movies, and as such the horror that comes off of the page tends not to be visual but rather emotional. I guess that is why Stephen King is so popular (though his use of the supernatural to supplement his literary horror adds to it).

This book does not deal with the supernatural but rather with the mundane and to write a good horror along those lines takes talent. Stephen King did that with Misery (though I have yet to read that book). This book does it through the use of being trapped (similar to Misery) and one thing that I remember my lecturer talking about was the ultimate horror of being trapped in one's own flesh. We see this, in a way, in Silence of the Lambs (another book, or actually a movie, on our reading list). Silence of the Lambs involves a serial

killer who kills and skins his victims, as if trying to make a bodysuit. In a sense, the killer has become dissatisfied with his own body, so he descends into madness to try to escape from his flesh, his body, by creating a suit from other people's bodies that he can wear.

It reminds me in part of Jeffery Damlier. He was homosexual, but he did not like sexual penetration (or so one documentary suggested, but his wikipedia entry says otherwise, and this may also relate back to the discussion on sex and violence in my previous review) however he could not find any others who would agree to fondling and kissing without the penetration, so he decided to create his own zombies, and began to kidnap people and inject toxic chemicals into them to turn them into mindless zombies. It didn't work and he ended up killing them. In a sense, this is another idea that it is through madness and insanity that somebody is able to overcome the inhibition of killing another human being. It is like what we think, that when somebody is capable of murder, and even multiple murders, then we consider them a monster. Maybe it is true, and it probably is true, however what we need to remember is that despite any psychological or psychiatric malfunction in their system, they are still a danger to society, and must be treated as such, because we cannot have people simply going around killing other people.

Hmm, I have said little about this book as is, but I guess there is not really any more that I can say about this book, so I will finish it off there.

Banushka says

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agos'a yazd???m yaz?y? ekledim [http://tembelveyazar.blogspot.com.tr/...](http://tembelveyazar.blogspot.com.tr/)

Trevor says

A well written book, but ultimately frustrating due to two reasons:

- 1) The constant changing of narrator - I often had to re-read passages to see the perspective from which the story was being told
- 2) The psychological drama wasn't as great as I had expected it to be, this certainly wasn't in the league of Patricia Highsmith

The Sydney background of the late 1930's and 40's was well described, and the characters rounded, though to make it a great novel it needs more than this.

A disappointing and frustrating read.

Helen says

I rated this book 5 because of the beautiful way it is written. Although I consider it a gloomy book throughout, the ending leaves the reader feeling there is hope for Clare, at least. For Felix and Laura, there is none.

This book, set in Sydney in a time gone by, took me back to a time when I too wandered the streets of Sydney from Central Railway to the Quai with great enjoyment. It evoked strong memories of a city I love and once called home.

I walked with Laura. Not many books have the power to give me that lovely experience.

I highly recommend this one.

Lisa says

The Watch Tower, by Elizabeth Harrower, was the ANZ LitLovers book-group's choice for February, and it is a remarkable book. It puts me in mind of Christina Stead's The Man Who Loved Children, because although the style is completely different, it is a similar study of a dysfunctional family.

An abusive family, that is. Laura and Clare are the unwanted children of a neglectful, absent father and a self-indulgent mother. At the time that the story begins their father has just died and their mother Stella Vaizey is taking them out of boarding school. This puts paid to Laura's ambition to be a doctor, and it ensures that Clare never really develops any ambition at all. In Sydney Stella indulges her whims with petty cruelties, attacks on the girls' self esteem, and sabotages any good memories they might have of their father by blaming him for their financial straits. She is emotionally distant, 'like a park that had never once removed the Don't Walk on the Grass signs'. All the work of running the household in its genteel poverty falls to Laura who becomes a surrogate mother to Clare.

Disastrously, Stella also farms Laura out to work, and it is at the mind-numbing factory which makes plastic boxes, that Laura comes to the notice of Felix Shaw, who quixotically decides to marry her. Almost the first question any book group will ask is, why on earth does Laura accept him?

To read the rest of my review please visit <http://anzlitlovers.com/2013/02/14/th...>

Alexandra Daw says

Ouf - I've done it! When I sat down on Saturday at the beginning of my long weekend, I received an email telling me that I had to return this book today. I tried to renew the loan but to no avail. I simply had to read it this weekend. So ...I did! Which is really the best way to read a book I think....all in one go. Only this was a bit of a struggle. Not, I hasten to add, because it is a bad book. It's just that the subject matter is a bit wearing to be reading constantly. This is a psychological drama of stupendous proportions set in the 1930s/40s in Sydney, Australia. Laura and Clare find themselves entrapped in the snare of the Bluebeard like Felix, Laura's husband. Will they ever find the courage to leave him and get away? This is not an action packed book but it is a book of the interior i.e. people's innermost thoughts. And the power of one personality over

another. Overall I liked Harrower's writing and ideas enormously. There were some passages where I wanted to grab a fellow reader and say "Oy? Does this make sense to you? I don't get this particular sentence." but apart from that, it was a good read. I particularly liked the descriptions of travelling on the ferry and coming in to Circular Quay. Harrower describes all the smells and sounds and feelings of being on board and alighting. It quite makes me wish to go back to Sydney and catch a ferry again. Here is an example of her writing. The scene is a shorthand class at the secretarial school Clare has just joined at the age of 14 - Jean Robertson is the teacher. "Jean Robertson crossed her legs. The girls waited, agog. To be given secrets, the key to the code, by a grown-up not related, was - 'How do you think people make friends? How do you think adults get to know each other?' They had no idea. They appeared to struggle to work it out. They still had no idea. They hardly really even yet expected to turn into adults. They were born children. They had begun to see they might have to turn into taller, older children, but when they worried about changing into adults it was so far-fetched they had to giggle and giggle. Because they knew that just as they had (luckily) been born young and children, grown-ups came into being old and made that way.' This book was originally published in 1966 but has been republished by Text Classics with an introduction by Joan London. Good stuff.
