



Good Behaviour

Molly Keane (Introduction) , Marian Keyes (Introduction)

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I do know how to behave - believe me, because I know. I have always known...'

Behind the gates of Temple Alice the aristocratic Anglo-Irish St Charles family sinks into a state of decaying grace. To Aroon St Charles, large and unlovely daughter of the house, the fierce forces of sex, money, jealousy and love seem locked out by the ritual patterns of good behaviour. But crumbling codes of conduct cannot hope to save the members of the St Charles family from their own unruly and inadmissible desires.

Good Behaviour Details

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Anniky says

It's not you, Molly, it's me. You write brilliantly and you know humans all too well. It's just that very few things frustrate me as much as people who deliberately delude themselves, so I just couldn't stand Aroon. I know, it's all bleak humor, but I mostly found it just bleak, without anything to help me enjoy the book but your way with words and the genius balancing of everybody's unlikability - which is a lot, I admit. So with your permission, I'll continue to admire Good Behaviour, but I cannot love it.

Trish says

Just not my cup of tea. I couldn't even figure out if it was supposed to be funny or just sad.

I definitely seem to have different tastes to the rest of my book club (although that said, most of them didn't like any of the characters in this, either, so maybe we were in sync this time).

It also supports my view that I have different tastes to the Man Booker Prize committee, as well - I'd never have nominated this.

Nancy says

I loved this book, but at the same time found it profoundly unsettling. Described as a comedy of manners, it is at the very least, a black, black comedy. The "well-born" family at the heart of the story dissemble, deceive and distort at every step along the way. Molly Keane has masterfully crafted a cast of characters that are so perfectly presented we would immediately recognize each one if they walked into a room today. In this quirky family story no good deed goes unpunished
And there is precious hope of redemption for the less virtuous.

I was so eager to understand where the characters were headed that I turned the pages with wild abandon. I knew better than to hope for a fairy tale ending, but I also read with some optimism that the author would surprise me at the end of the novel.

This book was published late in the author's life and she was rewarded by being short-listed for the Booker Prize the year of its publication. I am having a difficult time describing the merits of this unusual book, but it is only fair to say that it is beautifully conceived, far from commonplace, and a breath of fresh air compared to so many of the formulaic contemporary novels we encounter.

Liina Bachmann says

"Good Behaviour" is an exquisite read.

Aroon St Charles is a daughter of Irish upper class family, a "Big House" family in the country. She narrates

the going on's of her life and boy, is it vile. The book is most often described as a dark comedy and it is indeed very funny at times but mostly it makes the little hair on your back rise and groan with frustration at Aroon's naivety. A distant mother, drunkard father, gay brother, many deaths...all masked under the icy Good Behaviour. Nothing is ever brought above the level of what is decent, not a flinching emotion not a tear not a raised voice.

Keane trusts her reader to "get" most of the undercurrents in the novel. I didn't get some on my first read and only after reading the reviews were there even more "so THAT'S why he said that!" moments. It is a very layered novel, funny but not "hahaha" funny. Dark and disturbing and in my opinion, very very sad. I am not even gonna mention that the prose itself great, which makes it quite a page turner as well.

David says

Another Anglo-Irish family whose members are dedicated to mutual assured destruction, even as they slide into genteel poverty. Nobody in the St Charles household would dream of treating the dogs or horses badly; servants and local tradesmen don't fare so well. But the brunt of their vituperation is saved for one another, with each family member nursing a store of petty grievances, both real and imaginary. Our guide for this particular version of hell is the unlovely, delusional daughter of the house, Aroon. Neglected by her philandering father, despised by her icy mother, used by her charming brother, she pines for love and approval. Her transformation to bitter, vengeful, old maid is inevitable and heartbreaking to watch.

The stifling closed world of the decaying Anglo-Irish ascendancy is Molly Keane's chosen niche, and nobody captures it better (except, perhaps, William Trevor). While parts of "Good Behaviour" are very funny indeed, it is considerably darker and more complex than the rest of her books, all of which cover similar ground. An engaging, if ultimately depressing, account of a not so well-behaved family.

Ffiamma says

una famiglia terribile, che si ostina a ignorare l'incombente disastro finanziario, che soffoca qualunque aspirazione, in cui la ricerca d'amore della grassa e impacciata aroon diventa l'unico (e a tratti terribile e disperato) guizzo di umanità, in cui, in nome delle buone maniere, si ignorano suicidi, morti, tresche, rapporti affettivi poco chiari. un romanzo allo stesso tempo triste e divertente, con un colpo di coda di perfidia che fa oscillare tra le lacrime e il sorriso. molto cinico, molto interessante.

Fionnuala says

When I read this in the early eighties, it was a huge eye opener for several reasons. It was probably one of the first contemporary novels that made me think - ah, now I know what is meant by a classic. Even though I was a fairly unsophisticated reader at the time, I could tell that the writing was superb, I just knew that the characters were true to life, and I even suspected that they were portraits of real people. I admired the way Molly Keane was able to ridicule all our human foibles while maintaining a certain sympathy for her characters on the part of the reader. If she hadn't been nominated for the Booker prize in 1981, this novel would have escaped my attention, and that of many other readers, I suspect. Looking back to the early years of the Booker short list, I realise that it brought to our attention some authors who would otherwise have escaped the public eye, and who subsequently did disappear from view for one reason or another. Who

remembers Keri Hulme and her moving but disturbing novel, *The Bone People*?

A. Mary says

This is a solid novel that grimly marches through its story, jaw firmly set, while onlookers watch in disbelief--how can this plot be sustained by these characters? But it is sustained because that's what these characters do, in spite of their fraying, worn-thin elbows. There's almost no one to like in this book, not even Aroon, who narrates. We can't believe how thick she is, how deluded, but Keane doesn't let her story be simplistic. Aroon has been so isolated, kept in ignorance, that she knows nothing, perhaps refuses to know anything. Come on--Rose is not "warming his feet" when her hand is under the Major's blankets. At other times, we want to shout, "For the love of God, he's GAY." We can't be entirely frustrated with Aroon, though, because her mother is a horrible person, who with tremendous decorum--it's all about good behaviour, really--engages in relentless verbal abuse of her daughter. I ended up filled with pity for Aroon, and in a cheeky twist, thanks to the Major (whose serial infidelities become more and more forgivable--maybe), Aroon wins. This is more than the story of a calcified family. It's a look at a fossilized stratum of Irish society, watching as it disintegrates.

Mariel says

She must have noticed my bosoms, swinging like jelly bags, bouncing from side to side; without words she conveyed the impression of what she had seen as unseemly- the Fat Lady in the peepshow.

Aroon St Charles topsy-turves the pedestal biosphere that doesn't leave the suffocating family life. Oops, heads and tails are the same damn fix. The outside life must look like dim glamour in her imaginations. Other people who don't look like her whirling in arms inside blurry parties. Letters from spoiled children in Africa. Dear Penthouse, oppression and slaughter. Solicitors behind closed doors. The future is the same kind of life. The past is the same damp material from sobbing wet dreams. The rest of the St Charles clan that also includes the servants hold her in their judge first, see later. Papa and brother precede her as a joke. I hate it when she's grinning with the punchline like they'll start laughing with her. Servants conspire to keep the big girl hungry. Aroon reminded me of Janet Frame's *Faces in the Water* when the likewise no safe corner heroine sneaks chocolates from other inmates. She quickly eats the short breads and cake slices before her father's pampering cook cum nurse Rose can come back in time (I bet he fucked her a time or two). Aroon just knows that when her mother is in charge she will never get to eat. Rose won't cook for her and the skinny mama never eats.

Good Behaviour begins when the self pitying fantasy is done. Papa left everything to Aroon and she after all can withhold pity and control over them. At first I just thought it was a waste to live your life hoping for others to be grateful to you. Never trust anyone who says they know what is best for you. It is probably a self reassurance that they are living their own the right way if you are doing it too. But no, Keane only detuned the hard chairs. Rose in the end accuses Aroon. Mummie dies to spite her. They were always like that. Backs turned, you don't fit our parameters of whatever. I really think they wouldn't have colluded over anything if Aroon hadn't been there to leave out. There once was a brother and his friend (probably lover) Richard love

each other more when they can giggle and close their door on Aroon. Papa can fuck the governess on the sly. No one gave any other fuck about that governess. I really just thought it was a shame that anyone thought that was all life had to offer. There had to be better lays out there than that old fart. Maybe if Aroon had met another man than snotty ass Richard she would have wanted something more. It was too bad that her fantasies are so limp dicked. What is it worth if these boring family members say they appreciate you? I wish I could give her that part in Fat Kid Rules the World when the fat kid realizes what he was imagining that skinny people didn't have any problems because they were skinny (and start a band!). I really wish Good Behaviour didn't numb me with the day in and day out of alliances. That's probably how dreams died in that purgatory before dreams are born. Aroon won't let her sick father have his whiskey (the doctor said it was okay. I suspected he might have been against it if someone other than the lackluster Aroon had asked him). Maybe because she was too "good girl" to pity him (man was gonna die anyway). It started to feel like being with them too long every time something happened like Papa and brother infecting their society with jokes about Big Girl Aroon. I kinda felt like after all that it wasn't a bad thing if Aroon got one over them. They were never going to love her. But at least she didn't have to go hungry. I don't want to think about all of the ugly women who didn't have jobs or families who loved them. They probably ended up in mental institutions like Janet Frame or eeked out in poverty. Growing older and colder. What do you do before they bury you? It is too bad that I felt like I was being buried more than Keane saying anything about this.

I read this on my kindle. The whole time I casted different Tamara de Lempicka portraits for the cover. Virago use her a lot and the larger than life/world is less frame of girls in their places just felt so Good Behaviour and big girl Aroon to me. But no! I'm sure the paperback from them has some irritating descriptor about black humor and raucous whatever (anything called "raucous" instantly puts me in the mood to want to like it less). I don't know about the humor in Good Behaviour. I wish it had a sense of humor that was internal. It is external like theirs a soulless mindless god. Hey, you weren't there the day we passed out what other people got. Here's a pale copy to watch what it could have looked like, Aroon. I wish she had been there when they handed down imagination. ANYTHING other than bland stupid Richard. She was pining over HIM?! I wish I could stop reading books that are really just about people wanting to see themselves a certain way and everyone and everything else in the world is about supporting that self vision. There wasn't anyone in Good Behaviour not like that.

Catie says

Virago Book Club - January 2017

Claire Fuller says

Love, love, loved this book. Beautiful writing, sad story, great characters. Oh, just go and read it. The only thing I found odd was that Mothering Sunday by Graham Swift which I read last year, was so very similar, so similar that I'm surprised no one has pointed this out. Same time period, and similar things happen, although Swift's is set in England and this is Ireland. Made me feel a bit weird about Mothering Sunday.

Sarah says

The St Charles family are hit by hard and changing times in 1920's Ireland. These are the dying days of

Anglo-Irish aristocracy where appearances must be preserved and emotions muted and controlled.

Events are narrated through the eyes of a child, Aroon St Charles, revealing subtle details which are confused and not understood by her, but as a reader reveal the truth she is too young and naive to grasp. Secrets, lies and tragedy surround the family as they each struggle with life events. Aroon's charismatic father is recovering from a war injury which causes feelings of discontent and failure, but bridges a gap between his children as he strives to face his vulnerability. Aroon's mother is cold, distant and shallow with a belittling habit which deepens the separation between mother and daughter.

It is a beautifully written novel with a tense, tight style, complex characterisation and moments of dark, black comedy. Tension is gradually heightened as economic worries and a lack of initiative begins to drain resolve. The perpetuation of good behaviour at all costs, along with a certain arrogance, adds a shocking and ironic twist.

Mela says

I stood about, smiling, compressed, submerged in politeness; aching in my isolation; longing to be alone; to be away; to be tomorrow's person

It wasn't a light novel. **All that sadness and loneliness. Reading it hurt me** and (because of it) I had been thinking (in the beginning) even of abandoning it, of not finishing it.

Certainty fell away from me as though a loved person dropped my hand in indifference.

One is sure: The book is worth reading. **It wasn't a world of Angela Thirkell's books, it showed a different site of the same times. And although part of me wants to know only the other (nicer) site, such novels like 'Good Behaviour' are a must-read for all who like to read about those times. I would call it even the gem of the genre.** I will remember it for a long long time.

Our good behaviour went on and on, endless as the days. No one spoke of the pain we were sharing. Our discretion was almost complete.

I agree completely with Liina Bachmann's review. She grabbed it perfectly. [Warning: there are spoilers in Liina's review.]

Cherie In the Dooryard says

I originally read this book while on semester abroad in Ireland. It was presented as an Irish classic, the great comeback from a neglected author. I've reread it many times since, but this time I revisited it after finishing Downton Abbey's third season. I wanted to be reminded of the other side of the coin, of what happens when the aristocratic family is unable to change, is locked into destructive patterns, is so entrenched in the idea of good behavior that it destroys itself.

This is a brilliant novel. It will always be one of my favorites. You should read it.

Arlette says

I shall be careful when referring to "warming feet"..... hate to get that mis-interpreted:)
