



In a Dark Wood

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Interspersing the magic of fairy tales with a wry yet touching narrative, Amanda Craig examines the thin line between fantasy and reality, creativity and mental illness.

Benedick Hunter is a recently divorced, out-of-work, thirty-nine-year-old actor. Feeling both guilty and sorry for himself, he blunders through weekends with his two spirited children and fends off various women desperate to snare an eligible man, all the time fearing that he is on the brink of a nervous breakdown.

His life takes on a new direction, however, when he discovers a long-forgotten book of fairy tales his mother wrote and illustrated decades earlier. Drawn to its pages, he becomes entranced by the hints of reality embedded in the stories, from thinly veiled portraits of his own father and his parents' acquaintances to alluring glimpses of his mother as a young woman. Convinced that the stories can explain his mother's suicide when he was six and put an end to his agonizing mood swings, Benedick embarks on a journey to untangle the past, a journey that eventually takes him to the heart of his own nature, modern fatherhood, manic depression, and the elusive character of fairy-tales.

With imagination and incisive wit, Amanda Craig has written a novel that was selected as one of the "best of the year's books" by the The Times of London, which wrote, "Although not frightening enough to give you sleepless nights, Craig's wonderful, page-turning storytelling will keep you up way past your time for bed."

In a Dark Wood Details

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From Reader Review In a Dark Wood for online ebook

Katherine Joyce says

I loved this book. The main character was awful and so relatable that I couldn't help wanting him to get what he was looking for, following the path from England to America. There was a lot of dark humor, and so many funny parts that really shouldn't have been funny at all, but Amanda Craig has such a way with words. I loved the fairy tales throughout the book, and the ending was absolutely perfect. I want to read more by this author.

I randomly selected this book at the library. The cover drew me in, and the blurb on the inside cover sounded intriguing. Once I started reading, I knew this was a good choice. I loved this book.

Deirdre says

I quite liked this exploration of family, tragedy, parenting, and mental illness. At times it caught me off guard with either hilarity or poignancy. It's a keeper.

Gary Bonn says

This is an excellent book - so well done it took my breath away at times. Occasionally I was left thinking 'how did she do that?'

This took a huge amount of research or experience to write and required the author to immerse herself in the main character boldly in order (very successfully) to draw the reader in. Great art.

I can highly recommend this for those who want to explore the boundaries of what it is to be human.

Kaethe says

From an essay in the Telegraph

"Maeve Binchy's warmth and interest in other people included their families, but I can't help but feel that her detailed portraits of ordinary life might not have been so predicated on the relationships between men and women had she had a child. "

Oh, please. Nothing is perhaps more pointless than speculating on what a writer might have written if the writer had lived a completely different life. As a Binchy fan, I'm pissed that an author would publish such a shallow critique of another writer.

"No matter what your experience of adult love, there is nothing as strong as the bond between a mother and a child." That's just crap. Some mothers and children have a strong bond, some don't. Some fathers and children have a strong bond. Some don't. Trading in cliches does not endear me to your powers of observation, Craig.

"Binchy, whose first novel was about a 20-year friendship between two women, didn't need the experience of motherhood to write about love and friendship in a way that charmed millions. But she might have dug deeper, charming less but enlightening more, had she done so. " Really, the one thing missing from the story of the friendship between two girls growing up and going to college is children? I suppose that's always bugged you about Spartacus, too.

I've no idea what Craig's novels are like. I had this one on my to-read list, but now I'm thinking that no one with such a narrow view of what constitutes humanity could possibly write a character I'd give a damn about.

My endless love to the commentator who accused Craig of "mommy-jacking" an obituary. That's a brilliant turn of phrase.

Val says

Benedick is a not very successful actor. His wife, a successful novelist, has taken their two young children, moved in with her publisher and is divorcing him. His father, a successful columnist, keeps suggesting he get a proper job. His mother, a successful children's author and illustrator, committed suicide when he was a small child. It is not surprising that Benedick feels inadequate and depressed.

At the start of the book he moves in with Ruth, who had acted as a mother to him when he was growing up. He also finds a book of fairy tales which his real mother had adapted and illustrated. With help from Ruth and a new interest in finding out more about his mother, he seems to be coming out of his depression.

Laura's fairy tales and Benedick's search are used in parallel, and this was the best part of the book for me. Many of these traditional stories were not originally for children and reflect some very dark aspects of life. There are clearly some secrets in Laura's own life, which she has incorporated in her illustrations and the stories she has chosen to include in her book.

Benedick is not a sympathetic or reliable narrator and as his mood changes through the course of the book he becomes less so. (view spoiler)

Lauren says

Creepy, in a way that I wasn't expecting. The one thing that bothered me was that I knew the fairy tales mentioned in the book fairly well, so it bothered me that they were "passed off" as if they were the work of the mother. Not bothered me in the sense that I thought the author was trying to fool me as to their origins, but in the sense that since I knew they were not written by this fictional character, it kept throwing me out of the story. If that makes sense.

Eileen says

Recommended by: BookBrowse.com

2.5 stars. It was an interesting premise, but I've read so many books recently about dysfunctional, depressed, mentally ill characters, that this one paled in comparison. I thought this novel would explore the world of depression and how stories such as fairy tales can be used to help the healing process, but that didn't seem the case to me. The fairy tales, which are the best parts of the novel, don't really bring about many changes in

the main character, Benedick Hunter. Finding a copy of his mother's fairy tales, he finds himself curious to know why she committed suicide when he was six. So he starts to search for answers. He continues to read the fairy tales, but after sparking the initial curiosity, they simply become curiosities themselves. The end is resolved in an overly tidy, quick and improbable manner that disappointed me. Read the fairy tales and the rest is easily skipped. -- eps, 07/14/04

5/5 The woods are lovely, dark and deep., July 30, 2002

Amazon.com Reviewer: DANIEL MYERS (see more about me) from Greenville, SC USA

This is a mesmeric, haunting novel, and for those of you who are fooled into thinking this is primarily about mental illness...Think and READ again. You have fallen into a sort of trap set by this extremely subtle, almost wily, author. Yes, mental illness is one thematic level on which one can read this, in so many ways, disturbing and original book.-"And when the ink begins to write/ It makes the paper black and white."-The poem from Benedick's visionary mother pops up at beginning and end of the narrative. Why?

Read aright, the story of Benedick's quest interlarded with his mother's dark tales WILL keep you up at night. To come to the conclusion that all she and Benedick need or needed is/was some psychotropic drug like Lithium is to say the same of, say, Shelley or Van Gogh. If you think the ending, at first glance, is simplistic, you're right. But if you think that it undermines the the otherwise terror and fairy tale ridden narrative, then you're reading it on the level which most adults read fairy tales: That is, you're not reading it.

For the ending is the most terrifying part of the book: a fairy tale full of fairy tales that tell us more about ourselves than we like to think. Why is the ending so almost hostilely, one might say, simplistic? Again, ask yourself, what's the line with which fairy tales, including the dark fairy tales of Benedick's mother, end? Then reread the book, as I did...if you dare!

Ellie says

I loved the use of fairly tales in Amanda Craig's *In a Dark Wood*. I found the book well-written and absorbing. I was interested in the mother's mental illness and its effect on the family.

But somehow I wanted the book to be more than it ended up being. I wanted to feel as obsessed as the son-or the mother. I wanted to be more pulled into the book; instead, I felt detached, interested but at a distance. The book seemed to be presenting as vividly emotional but I felt more clinically interested. So I enjoyed it but at a 3 not 4 star level. It may be what I was longing for was not what this author was doing-my failure, not hers.

Aria says

A really polarized novel about bipolar depression, Amanda Craig's *'In a Dark Wood'* is quite a remarkable piece to behold. It's utterly simplistic with its depiction of modern life but at the same time strangely enchanting with its utilization of allegorical fairy tales. Set in present day England our narrator Benedick Hunter is going through a relatively shocking divorce and crippling depression and while going through a

series of rather comedically half hearted suicide attempts decides to investigate the even sadder circumstances surrounding the suicide of his mother Laura, a sometime celebrated feminist authoress of fairy tales, some 35 years earlier.

His journey begins by investigating and interviewing key figures of a now defunct milieu of her former neighbors, friends and acquaintances from the book publishing world and eventually finds himself in the rural backwoods of South Carolina her birthplace. In the process of which he finds not only the truths surrounding her sudden demise but also the nature of himself.

An extensively poignant yet minimalist novel there are several times when sitting back and reading it almost feels like you're sitting in on conversations which deal with the complex nature of everything from feminism, generational discord and the context of fairy tales in relation to the nature of social structure and design. What's quite interesting is that the depiction and discussion of duality and reconciliation between polar opposite forces and paradigms is laid out. We see the divide between men and women challenged several times and even the cultural distinctions between American and British identity to name a few.

Also while the story deals extensively with depressing themes such as mental illness and suicide it is not an overtly depressing piece to read. In fact while it delves into questions of the psyche it is not even really a completely sentimental novel.

In fact the only thing that's really depressing about it is that it becomes eventually quite tawdry and predictable at some point. The mystery that's been built is completely decimated by some completely obvious plot settings and structures and give away observances. The focus of the story begins on Laura's motives for suicide and ends with our narrator coming into his own understanding of his self-destructive tendencies. Which is kind of like a duh moment. And for such an acerbically written prose it ends with such a fluffy fairy tale ending that you kind of revolve between that warm feel good place and utter dissatisfaction at having been built up to really nothing that you haven't read before.

Ultimately, I'd have to say that this is a rather charming read that I would recommend if you're looking for something with a bit of magic and mystery just don't expect any huge pay off.

Canadian Reader says

Benedick Hunter, a less-than-successful actor in his thirties, is in bad shape. His romance-novelist wife, Georgina, recently left him for her publisher, taking their two young children, and now the house the family shared has been sold. When Benedick is packing up books, he comes across a fairytale collection written and illustrated by his mother, Laura, who committed suicide when he was only six. His father, Howard, an opinionated newspaper columnist, has a long history as a philanderer, and Benedick believes his mother's death was related to this betrayal. Because Benedick's finances are poor and the odds of his getting an acting job aren't favourable, he accepts the offer of a room at Ruth Viner's home. Ruth, a physician turned psychotherapist and an American like Laura, was a sort of mother to Benedick after Laura's death. Intimately acquainted with his family's history, Ruth encourages Benedick to travel to New York and the American South, where he can speak to artistic people who knew his enigmatic mother (including the publisher who "discovered" her and her sister Lily). Once there, his young son having travelled with him, Benedick experiences a mental-health crisis.

A fair bit of Craig's novel concerns itself with the fairytales Benedick's mother adapted for her collection *North to Nowhere*. Several of these fairytales are included in their entirety in the novel. The central

characters in Laura's illustrations are said to look like her, and the supporting characters are dead ringers for important people in her circle. As well as the tales, Craig includes numerous mini-disquisitions on the significance and enduring appeal of fairytales and on children's literature in general. (Craig has been a children's literature reviewer and her passion for the subject is evident, but the factoids are hardly germane to the story.) Benedick seems to find the fairytales valuable in understanding his lost parent, but I think most readers of the novel would disagree. I didn't find the tales shed much light on the long-dead Laura. Craig makes much of the fact that many traditional tales are set near the woods. The woods are supposedly emblematic of danger, of losing one's way, as well as a symbol of the unconscious. The author suggests that Benedick, like his mother before him, is lost and trying to find his way out of the woods.

With its exploration of loss, mental illness, creativity, and . . . yes, fairytales, this novel is occasionally interesting, but it has a very didactic feel to it--as though the author is giving the reader short lectures on some pet subjects. Some of the writing is fine. Mostly, though, it's kind of a slog. The characterization is pretty clunky, the depiction of a manic episode is overdone, and the traditional tales in the narrative feel forced and superimposed, rather than integral parts of the whole. I had the sense that Craig was so fond of fairytales that she was determined to include them, even if they weren't adding much to the narrative proper. As for Benedick (yes, the "dick" is deliberate): he is just not believable—neither are most of the other characters. The interactions with his six-year-old son feel particularly inauthentic. The extended period of unemployment (while living off his mother's royalties and funds from the sale of his house) that provides him with the freedom to travel to the U.S.A. to find out more about his dead mother feels like a plot contrivance too big to swallow.

I enjoyed and admired Craig's 2010 novel *Hearts and Minds . In a Dark Wood* , published ten years earlier, is a very different work, clearly that of a novelist finding her way. It is engaging in places, soap-operish in spots, and not very effective overall.

Christie says

Except for the overly happy ending, which is still qualified by the pages before it, I thought this was a brilliant book about mental illness and suicide. Definitely heavy subjects, so don't pick it up if you are feeling down, but a real page turner nonetheless. Everyone experiences the illnesses described in the book differently, but I have these along with some others (fun fun fun) and I found it incredibly relatable. The choice the narrator faces at the end is one I face too, and I liked that the author made it clear that there were in fact negatives to BOTH sides, that it was indeed a difficult choice to make.

This book is also about fairy tales, their hidden meanings, their psychological importance, etc. I do wish that we could have seen the pictures in the book for ourselves, but I could see them clearly in my mind so that is good enough. Be prepared to find yourself longing for a copy of unexpurgated Grimm or Outside Over There by Maurice Sendak to ponder over.

SPOILERS

There is implied incest. It actually is important to the story and is not described in any detail at all. I generally stop reading when I encounter incest and consider it seriously overdone in modern fiction, but in this story it kind of necessary and so discreet that I couldn't really be offended or grossed out. The fact that the characters have no idea makes this easier to stomach.

Shelley says

This book really surprised me. I disliked the narrator intensely. I couldn't understand what kind of person would react the way he did. The end of the book revealed the answer; I was taken aback. I consider myself well-informed on the subject of mental illness, but this book showed me where I can improve in empathy and understanding.

This is another book that I like better after the fact. The more I think about it, the more I want to read it again. This may be one to add to my bookshelves.

Jeanne says

This novel follows Benedick, a newly divorced man and out of work actor with two children, in a manic descent. The discovery of a book of fairy tales his mother illustrated shortly before committing suicide leads him to search for clues about who his mother was. The story is beautifully written and the narrative is interspersed with the fairy tales which seem to draw Benedick farther and farther away from real life and into the center of a mystery he can't control. As he meets and talks with friends and family who knew his mother he finds himself living through the fairy tales and attempting to use them as a divining rod not only for what went wrong for his mother, but what has gone wrong for him.

This is a powerful story with a protagonist that for much of the novel is a totally unlikable character. Craig makes it work though by drawing you into the mystery of Benedick's mind and especially the mystery of who his mother was and wasn't. I highly recommend this book!

Vivienne says

I found this a very satisfying read with a sensitive portrayal of manic-depression, especially the seductiveness of the manic phase. There are also a series of quite beautiful fairy-tales incorporated as part of the text.

One that I borrowed from the library but have now bought my own copy as I feel it is one I'll want to revisit.

Agumom says

Another surprisingly good book. I borrowed it from a friend because I liked the version of the cover on the edition he had. Anyway, the book was good. I enjoyed having fairy tales interspersed throughout the main story and I enjoyed the mild culture-clash of a British man and child hiding away in the US South. Of course, the love triangles and family secrets kept the story moving, but I found myself reading the fairy tale parts with more fervor than the rest of the story. One of the most striking parts of this novel, intentional or not, was the commentary on how mental illness was seen in my parents' generations and those generations

preceding them as compared to the way it is seen now. Today, we can discuss mental illness. There is, however, a stigma remaining for people diagnosed with a mental illness, but at least we can talk about it now. Before, a diagnosis became a family secret, a skeleton in the closet or a stain on the family reputation. Mental and emotional disorders were passed through the generations with no one adequately prepared to recognize or deal with it. Even if a parent knew that the inheritance of a mental illness was a possibility for their kids, they still tried to pretend that moods and outbursts were simply phases to be dealt with until they passed. You can be damn sure that when I eventually breed and produce some offspring, I'll be getting professional help should any symptoms arise and probably find myself some nice support groups. Today, we can speak up and get help. Back then, you kept quiet until you were either completely alienated or dead. This review is far too long.
