



Lamb

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When Brother Michael inherits a small legacy, he defies his elders and runs away from the Home, taking with him twelve-year-old Owen. Posing as father and son, they concentrate on discovering the happiness that is so unfamiliar to them both, but as the world closes in on them, Michael moves towards a solution that is as uncompromising as it is inspired by love.

Lamb Details

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Author : Bernard MacLaverty

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Stephenson Holt says

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"He paid no attention but later asked Owen to stay behind. He looked at his hands and wrists. They were swollen and red. On the wrists were several horse-shoe-shaped welts, crescents where the blood had been brought to the surface, but the skin had not broken. 'How many did he give you?'

'Six'

'It's a cold morning for it,' said Michael. 'What was it all about?'

When he heard the story the whole thing seemed ludicrous. Someone had stolen a can of spray paint from the technical block and written in huge awkward letters; BENNY DIES O.K. Brother Benedict thought it was Owen. 'What made him think it was you?'

'He said they were my initials'

'What were?'

'O.K. means Owen Kane.'

When Brother Sebastian's father dies, leaving him a little money, he sees it (for a number of reasons) to be a good time to leave. Owen, the young boy of the dialogue above, has no life, parents that hate him and no future. Thankful for his own upbringing, Brother Sebastian decides to take on the role of father to Owen and the two leave together. The local radio station call it a kidnapping.

Arriving in London and taking on his real name of Michael Lamb, the two attempt to survive. Michael having little experience of life outside monastic life and Owen having little experience outside lies, stealing, beatings and being let down.

This novel should be read either just before, or just after *Narcissus And Goldmund* by Hermann Hesse with which it should be compared / contrasted (nightmare phrase from exam days). Both are monastic tales of Teacher and pupil and the great search for life. Both are excellently written and should be read by all.

Lamb takes us through experiences that are not what most of us can imagine happening to ourselves. Mac Laverty, however, takes up the challenge beautifully and takes us through the thoughts, feelings, ups and downs of this 'father and son.' Highly recommended.

Hans says

I was hooked from the start. This story is very well told. With a lot of feeling and insight. Very good indeed!

David says

A heartbreak story, but one I highly recommend.

Kyle Johnson says

A straightforward plot with such economic writing style and short, accessible chapters that made me want to read all of MacLaverty's works (this was my first). In my mind, this book was 5 stars for much of the way through, but there were just a couple of things that caught me off guard towards the end.

First, the main character, Michael Lamb: at times I felt that his motives could have been explained a bit more. MacLaverty greatly emphasizes the love that Michael has for the teenage Owen, but he doesn't give as lengthy an explanation about *why* Michael cares so much (even amidst realizing he doesn't care about the belief system he's chosen to live out as a Catholic teacher).

Secondly, while I read much of this book, I was amazed by how contemporary the writing felt -- I'm still shocked, in some ways, that it's a nearly 40-year-old book. The prose is elegant and still feels as if it were written today. However, at the end, the characterization of Haddock gave a clear sign of the time the book was written (1980). It's upfront in its labeling of Haddock as homosexual, but it becomes more problematic when Haddock is then equated with pedophilia and drug usage, as if there is no other way to portray a gay character. Actually, those two short chapters were the only part of the book that felt very extraneous.

Thirdly, the ending. It really just took a direction I'm still shocked by. Partly, this goes back to not understanding Michael's motives, even with the brief explanation in the final pages. If he really does things out of "love," he ends up being quite a twisted character, in my opinion. Rather than the author using the ending to enhance the complexity of the character (which is what I assume MacLaverty was trying to do), I don't think he pulled it off. I just interpreted it as a last-minute reveal of Michael's own insanity, in a way!

Leanne Mittelstadt says

It was an awful story. I just couldn't finish it. Ugh

Allan says

This novel, written by MacLaverty in 1980, is very different from his other famous book from that era, 'Cal', but equally good, and almost as depressing.

The book tells the story of Brother Sebastian, Michael Lamb in 'civilian' life, a woodwork teacher in a remote borstal in Donegal, who has just lost his father and is having doubts about his vocation. At the same time, he has serious reservations about the treatment of Owen, an epileptic, troubled and troublesome 12 year old pupil, at the hands of the establishment's head, Brother Benedict. Armed with part of his inheritance, he

suggests to Owen that they abscond to London, which they do, posing as father and son.

Even in 1980, such an event makes headline news, and, despite the 'innocence' of the relationship, unsurprisingly it is quickly established that the pair are being sought. While 'on the run', Michael's paternal love for the child is evident, and MacLaverty tells the tale with sympathy, some suspense and a bit of humour. However, things take a somewhat predictable path, leaving the novel to conclude in an extremely shocking manner.

This was a quick read which I enjoyed but found disturbing on its conclusion. Not quite as dark overall as 'Cal', but MacLaverty is definitely not an uplifting writer. I have read his three most famous novels now, and will perhaps aim to read 'Grace Notes' next.

Sue says

A very disturbing book not only that it depicts the deplorable acts of priests in a seminary but the decisions made by one of them in the name of wanting to help change the life of a child.

Angelika says

First I gave this book four stars, simply because I thought that under different circumstances I would have enjoyed it far more. "Lamb" is probably worth four stars, but for whatever reason I couldn't really get into it, and put it aside on many occasions although it's such a short read. I attribute it to the style...plus, the story moves a little slowly at times...

We've got an interesting premise, for the most part well-drawn, multi-faceted characters and - looking at it from Michael's perspective - a seemingly inevitable ending that couldn't be darker or more hopeless. It's when death appears to be merciful and the only solution in the face of all the struggles and horrors life brings along. However, in the end it's clear that death does not offer any kind of relief either for the one that brings it about.

This last page is extraordinary in style and content:

"He looked up, even though he did not want to look up, even though he could not bear to look, and saw the child in the distance **like a flaw on the sand** and about him cruising and hovering he saw three gulls their yellow beaks angled with screeching, descending slowly with meticulous care."

"Owen was dead. He had killed him to save him although he loved him more than anyone else in his life. He felt gutted. It was as if his insides and his soul had been burned out."

Apart from the relationship between Michael and Owen, I particularly liked the way MacLaverty wrote the dialogues between Michael and brother Benedict. The latter has a lot of one-liners that are imbued with acid.

"Diminished responsibility, brother can only be claimed for babies, idiots, and nuns."

Andrew De Sousa says

7.25/10

Clive Thompson says

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Linda K. says

A well-written book that aimed beyond Ireland with all its way-too-obvious symbolism and what not, but never reached my continental heart. I wish Michael killed Owen two chapters into the book. It made me annoyed to go through all the fuss of Michael taking the boy from Ireland to London and back. The naïvety of the main hero just made me hate priests even more than I already did.

Skylar Burris says

What a horrible, dark, depressing, fascinating, deadening, emotional, wonderfully written book. Someone once told me that all literature is ultimately either about God or about the absence of God. I'd put this in the latter category. Do you ever read something - and you're kind of mesmerized by it - but you get to the end and think - WTF was that? Well, that's how I felt about "Lamb."

Erin Hepner says

Will I never stop reading depressing Irish Literature?

Colin says

Bernard Mac Laverty is the author of one of my favourite books, Grace Notes, which I read some time ago. On the strength of that I also read his fantastic short story collection, Matters of Life and Death. So, when I came across this original King Penguin edition of his 1980 first novel, Lamb, I snapped it up. It's a dark and distressing tale of two damaged young men searching for the faintest glimmer of love in an unforgiving culture of religious authority and hypocrisy. There's little optimism and little hope of redemption, and the ending is bleak. Mac Laverty handles his material very well; the plot is beautifully paced, the characters are very well realised, and the book is gripping to read, despite the grim nature of the subject. It's not as significant an achievement as Grace Notes, but for a first novel, it's very good indeed.

Steph says

A bittersweet, gentle book. Precisely devastating in its narrative, graceful and moving, memorable. Michael and Owen are beautifully written characters, tangled in a web of innocence and experience, love and death, an apt metaphor for Ireland old and new.
