



Chance

Joseph Conrad

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A remarkable book, the story of Flora De Barral, daughter of the Great De Barral, a monumental swindler, and her love for the sea captain who married her. Marlow tells the story in his usual quiet manner which is so dramatic under the quiet, and shows Chance the master hand directing and interfering at any moment.

Chance Details

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Author : Joseph Conrad

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Frank says

Once again, off to a good start, but gets pretty bloody boring pretty soon. Not sure if I'll finish this. I'm sure I'll miss a few nice paragraphs and interesting observations by Marlow, but I'll also save a great deal of time and skip a lot of over-elaborate narration of pretty melodramatic plot twists.

Ali says

Although the novel was not one upon which Conrad's later critical reputation was to depend, it was his greatest commercial success. *Chance* is narrated by Conrad's regular narrator, Charles Marlow, but is characterised by a complex, nested narrative in which different narrators take up the story at different points. The narrators describe and attempt to interpret various episodes in the life of Miss de Barral, the daughter of a convicted swindler named Smith. Miss de Barral leads a sheltered life while her father is prosperous. She then must rely on the generosity of others, who resent her or have agendas for her, before she escapes by marrying Captain Anthony. Much of the book involves the musing of the various narrators over what Miss de Barral and the Captain expected from this union, and what they actually got from it.

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http://www.goodreads.com/author_blog_...

Larry says

This is now my favourite Conrad novel, completely different than any of his other books and a most pleasant surprise. A unique love story, its quirkiness suggests it was ahead of its time with the unique and strong female character. A great love story!

Michael Graeme says

A great fan of Conrad in my youth. This one is my personal favourite.

David says

Mediocre Joseph Conrad, only recommended for die-hard fans or completists. Basically a slow moving story of how chance plays into the lives of the main characters and brings about a minor miracle.

In typical Conrad fashion, he employs an awkward narrative device. It's basically in 1st person although we never know who "I" is. On top of this most of the story is narrated by the trusty Marlow (Heart of Darkness, Lord Jim) over the course of an evening, in this case perhaps 12 hours straight. And of course he knows things that only the protagonist would know, kind of a proxy for 3rd person omniscient which is what Conrad should have used in the first place. Sometimes Marlow is narrating what another character told him and this gets rather confusing for no good reason.

OK, there are good things. The characters are interesting although the female protagonist is a little artificial (Conrad does better with strong male characters with a tragic flaw). His descriptions of the psychological underpinnings of every word and action is pretty fun if you're patient. And the culmination of all the plot threads is satisfying.

So, what I should have said at the outset...read Lord Jim or Victory instead.

Wendy says

Conrad's moral imagination is unparalleled, except by Henry James, of whose influence this book bears some signs. Also breathtaking in its technical handling of the mechanics of narrative. Anyone wishing to study or write a novel could do no better than to start here.

Lucy says

I think the fact that this was a commercial success whereas the Great Reading Public ignored Lord Jim says a lot about the taste of the early 20th century. I'm reading through Conrad, chronologically, and this was such a disappointment. If this had been my introduction, I'd have read no further. The absurdity of the narrator device intrudes constantly, Flora is just too unlucky to be credible, and the scenes at sea may just as well have been in a London hotel for all the atmosphere created. I did like the intrusive dog, though.

Tempo de Ler says

Acaso foi, inicialmente, fonte de desconsolo e alguma confusão devido à lentidão com que apresenta o enredo, que não é de percepção imediata, e também por acumular narração dentro de narração - a certa altura estamos a aceder a uma história contada por Powell a Marlow que a conta ao narrador principal que a partilha então connosco...

No entanto, volvido algum tempo, dei por Joseph Conrad a transformar-me gradualmente numa ávida coscuvilheira; a espreitar a vida alheia, interessada em «ouvir» conversas que não me dizem respeito e a tirar delas as minhas precipitadas conclusões. A pouco e pouco, história e personagens ganham dimensão; afeiçoamo-nos a indivíduos dos quais não chegámos realmente perto e de quem não ouvimos uma única palavra em primeira mão e então sim, apercebemo-nos que estamos perante um autor brilhante!

Achei as descrições relacionadas com o mar particularmente bonitas e o estatuto da mulher na sociedade da altura especialmente interessante; quando o pai de Flora é preso, esta vê-se completamente desamparada, à mercê da boa vontade - ou falta dela - de outras pessoas. A condição feminina é considerada sob vários

pontos de vista - Marlow, que faz algumas insinuações bastante desagradáveis sobre o género, Mrs. Fyne uma feminista activa e a própria Flora que nos mostra a impossibilidade de uma jovem como ela decidir o seu próprio futuro e garantir o seu próprio sustento.

Assim, e apesar de não termos começado da melhor maneira, *Acaso* acabou por se revelar uma leitura muito agradável e interessante, escrita de forma inteligente e cuidada.

Matthew says

Many of Joseph Conrad's novels deal with loneliness. Often the hero is isolated by chance circumstances and his own actions, and he is left to struggle to some kind of redemption. In *Chance*, the isolated figure is a woman, and this is the only one of Conrad's full-length novels to put a female character at its centre. Appropriately enough, it is in part a novel about the position of women, and Conrad succeeds (almost in spite of himself) in giving us a glimpse of the predicament of women in his society.

The heroine is Flora de Barral, and she is presented to our eyes by Marlow, the narrator of several Conrad stories. Flora is the son of a businessman who falls into disgrace after he corruptly plays the markets, and is sent to prison. His disgrace rebounds on the luckless Flora. She is spitefully attacked by her disappointed governess who had marital designs on de Barral, and Flora carries away the belief that she is unlovable.

This position is not helped by living with her cousins who behave badly towards her, and she is finally taken under the wing of the Fynes, a strait-laced couple with feminist ideals. Mrs Fyne gives Flora support until Flora elopes with her brother, Captain Anthony (whom Marlow never meets, curiously.) The angry Fynes say enough negative remarks about Flora to convince Anthony that she does not love him, and she is held back by her own belief that she cannot be loved. Anthony honourably agrees to marry her, and takes her and her father (who has just been released from prison) away on his ship.

Flora soon finds that even the crew do not like her, and her position is complicated by her father's self-centred resentment against her attachment to Anthony. Finally de Barral tries to poison his son-in-law, but he is seen by the young officer Powell who has become fond of Flora himself. Powell warns Anthony. Anthony decides to release Flora from her attachment to him, but Flora makes it clear that she does not wish to leave. De Barral instead drinks the poison, and the couple are free.

In a peculiar coda, we are informed that Anthony died six years later when his ship was sunk. However, the spell has been broken. Flora has finally found that she is capable of being loved by someone, and at the end Marlow is gently nudging her in the direction of the ardent Powell.

Conrad was fond of the books of Charles Dickens, and this is the most Dickensian work of the least Dickensian of novelists. The figure of a daughter and child (often pictured in Marlow's mind as walking hand in hand) is redolent of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Indeed *Chance* contains a few elements that might have stepped out of a Dickens book – a renowned businessman who turns out to be a fraud, a petulant scheming governess with unsuccessful designs on her master, the melodramatic climax to the Anthony-Flora-de Barral triangle.

As in a number of Dickens novels, *Chance* portrays a few examples of children at the mercy of bad parents. Anthony and Mrs Fyne were both brought up in the household of a cruel father (a poet, as we are constantly

reminded), and they were finally obliged to run away. Flora's father is reminiscent of Mr Dorrit, a jailbird, ungrateful for the help he receives, unable to admit he has ever done anything wrong, and holding his daughter back.

In that sense, the chance of who their parents were is part of the problem that initially prevents Anthony and Flora from finding happiness, and a number of other unfortunate happenings are down to chance. However the book's title is something of a misnomer, as chance hardly plays any greater part in the action here than in any other book.

It seems likely that Conrad harped on about chance so much here because it was a fashionable notion at the time. Certainly *Chance* was a surprise bestseller, even though it is not one of Conrad's best novels. The semi-happy ending was added to sell books, though in true Conrad fashion he cannot help cruelly snatching it away from us, at least in part.

The other fashionable aspect that Conrad included in the book is discussion of 'the woman issue', and we can only regard this as a partial success. Conrad was not the best person to discuss women's issues. Like Marlow, he was no feminist, and many of his works feature barely any female characters, though his portrayal of women had greatly improved over the course of his writing.

What we are left with is Marlow's frequent and crude generalisations about the personalities of women, some of them outrageous and bordering on misogyny. As if a little ashamed of his outbursts, Conrad tempers them with the half-hearted protests of the anonymous listener to Marlow's tale. However, there is no serious attempt to present any different opinion, so we can only conclude that Marlow's assertions are Conrad's.

Conrad is also somewhat ambivalent in his presentation of the Fynes. They are feminists, and they are not presented as especially likeable characters. Indeed, we feel that Marlow (and by extension) Conrad simply cannot make up his mind what to think of them. Mrs Fyne is the more enthusiastic feminist, and we are told that she often has female proteges that she seeks to mould into her own model of feminism. Her husband seems indifferent to the women who pass through his wife's care, and we may be inclined to wonder if her interest in these women is inspired by lesbianism.

Her most harmful tenet is the irresponsible notion that women are free from normal moral constraints because they are controlled by men in this world. Naturally Mrs Fyne does not extend this moral freedom to eloping with her own brother, and the Fynes behave badly, accusing Flora of a being an adventuress, thus poisoning the Anthony's early marriage.

However, while Marlow is frequently impatient with both the husband and wife, we have to acknowledge that they are not bad people according to their own lights. They have a strong moral sense of what is right, and Mrs Fyne does show some creditable humanitarian impulses to Flora at a difficult time in her life.

As I have said elsewhere, I feel that Conrad may have harboured some resentment towards women for their lack of understanding of the male world. He had spent much of his life on a ship or in parts of the world dominated by masculine professions, and he may have felt that women had no real comprehension of what really went on, a thought process perhaps compounded by his marriage to a wife who was his intellectual inferior.

Certainly for all of Marlow's generalised comments about women, Flora's behaviour is entirely explicable on its own terms, and not just because she is a woman. Of course her position in the book is affected by her gender. She is abandoned after her father's imprisonment, unprepared for surviving or working on her own,

and at the mercy of people's judgements. Hence Conrad manages to make some point about the plight of women in his time, even if it not entirely the point that he often seems to be making.

Aside from resentment against women, the book also contains resentment against people who live on the land. Several characters make disparaging comments about the people who live on land, and the way that they make situations more complicated with negative behaviour, as compared to those on the sea.

Indeed it seems as if making the transition from sailor to home-based novelist put a strain on some of Conrad's attitudes. At sea he learnt that problems can be solved by strong leadership, male solidarity and low tolerance towards dependency. However, as Conrad's political novels show, he was becoming aware that these values did not always translate well when applied to governance and the state, or the way of life of people who live on land. This may explain the exasperation that is often expressed for land folk in *Chance*.

Chance is an unsatisfactory novel in some respects. The first chapter has little to do with what follows, and seems to have been tacked on to the story, giving the book a false start. The ending is rather melodramatic, and Conrad's abrupt decision to kill off his hero as a final postscript does not play fair with the reader.

There is far too much cod-philosophising on various subjects, especially women, and this level of dense description slows the book down, often a problem when Marlow is narrating. There are other flaws with Marlow's narration too. It depends heavily on a wide range of voices as other characters repeat things to Marlow, but some of Marlow's insights are those of an omniscient narrator, not those of a man who is repeating the events described by eyewitnesses.

However, while *Chance* is not in the top drawer of Conrad novels, it is one that improves with each reading. There is some complex characterisation, and a serious attempt to present the problems of women, and the problems of marriage. It is a pity that it was *Chance* rather than one of Conrad's better novels that finally brought him the sales that he deserved, but perhaps the subject matter and style of *Chance* was easier for readers to grasp.

Thomas Sheehy says

If you're looking for a great book (i.e. entertaining and thought-provoking) by an author you respect, but who you may be avoiding for whatever reason, this is the book for you. It may seem at first like another gloomy "Marlow, tell us a story..." sort of yarn, but don't worry: most of the action takes place on land and revolves around the attempts by a young woman (Flora de Barral) to overcome her tragic and debilitating childhood.

Leonie says

I didn't like *Heart of Darkness* – found it strangely insubstantial in an exceedingly dense way – and was somehow encouraged to try this on the basis that I'd never heard of it. It's one of those books that's Another-Author-Lite but still manages to be its own thing. It's Henry James with a dash of Trollope – the heroine's father reminding me of Melmotte in situation, with the same emphasis on the belief in non-existent money generating its own temporary wealth. Conrad and James seem to have the same way of dramatising almost indefinable moral realities and shades of character. I often stopped to notice how much Conrad was making out of little, which is perhaps hard to make sound admiring, but I usually was. I like there to be somewhere

things are given their due. James feels very soft to me, and Conrad feels colder and harder edged.

The difference is effected by Marlow, who prides himself both on being cynical and outside the absurdities of everyday life and, I think, on respecting the things he values more than others. Marlow contributes sexism in one of the ways that sets my teeth on edge most: intrusive remarks about the limitations of women. This sort of thing always seems like the author was so overflowing with their tiresome opinions they simply couldn't keep them to themselves long enough to write a story. In this case, of course, I was only able to take a dislike to Marlow rather than Conrad, as Marlow is, nominally at least, a character rather than an author. I can't say I especially care for Marlow, but filtering the story through him does give it a particular flavour.

Flora, the heroine of a ruined, disgraced financier, is a bit like a Thomas Hardy heroine to start with, in the sense that it is her tragic difficultness which makes her strangely alluring, with her white little face and sense of damage and things left unsaid. Conrad is more ironic about it though and doesn't intend to see it through. She's really just a nice girl who's had a hard time. Dependant on menial spare woman type positions gained through the charitable interposition of an earnest couple, the drama of the first part of the story turns on her engagement to the brother of the earnest woman. His intervention in her life is made to represent her salvation, but she can only barely accept it and it is greeted with horror by his sister and brother-in-law. The second part of the story turns on the postponement on the salvation, as Flora and her husband, a captain, are joined on his ship by Flora's ex convict father.

I didn't enjoy a lot of the bit on the ship with Flora and Anthony and de Barral all almost hypnotised into stasis by each other, or at least de Barall hypnotising the other two. It clarified what I didn't like about *Heart of Darkness*; the effect of stagnation. I actually find descriptions of emotional stalemate and apathy viscerally suffocating when the atmosphere is really captured, and Conrad seems to have his own version which almost disappears in nullness. So I was pleased enough, if a little bemused, when this apparently insoluble situation is dissolved very quickly at the end.

I very much enjoyed a lot of the writing and will try something else by Conrad.

Galicius says

Absorbing plot in the first chapter, somewhat predictable second chapter. I find the multiple narrators confusing. The third chapter tells of a pyramid scheme and is told by Marlowe to Powell, I presume.

The narrators are becoming quite confusing by Chapter 4: the Fynes told it to Marlowe who is telling it to Powell or whoever he is and he's telling it with all the details, gestures of the characters as if he were there himself. After that point I get lost to whom Marlow is telling the story and who the narrator is and am disregarding the issue. No narrator other than an omniscient one could details of an intimate affair between two people.

I was continually drawn to the mystery of who is narrating and met with several surprises. Just when I read that Marlowe is talking I thought to Powell I find Marlowe is talking about Powell to someone else, but to whom? There have been scholarly papers written on this issue but this novel is not interesting enough for me to pursue that. I am a Conrad reader and this most successful novel in his lifetime is not a favorite at all out of a dozen I read by him. Now near the conclusion I come again to a predictable outcome about one of the main characters but I did not predict all of the ending.

Favorite quote: "It is difficult to retain the memory of the conflicts, miseries, temptations and crimes of men's self-seeking existence when one is alone with the charming serenity of the unconscious nature."

Robert B. Spalding says

Superb

A master story teller shows why he is still popular all these many years later. A psychological story that keeps one on the edge of one's seat from beginning to end. It is stunning to think that English was not Conrad's first language.

Laura says

Enjoyed it thoroughly for its excellent psychological portrayal. It had just a touch of the thriller without being sensational. Poignant, and reminds me of some real-life situations, not least of which is the Madoff scandal.

I haven't read any Conrad since high school, so this was a nice reintroduction. A little hard to follow at first, due to layers of narration, but worth the effort.
