



God on the Rocks

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With the birth of her baby brother, eight-year-old Margaret Marsh is banished from the house every Wednesday afternoon to enjoy the idyllic English seaside—at peace between the world wars—with the family's new, young, and bawdy maid. Largely ignored, the child has all the freedom she needs to observe and quietly condemn the adults around her. Gardam's novel, originally published in the UK in 1978, offers a searing blend of upended morals, delayed salvation, and emotional purgatory, especially where love and sex are concerned. Margaret's mother, Elinor, begins to lose the faith thrust upon her by her zealot husband, who is bent on the conversion of the young maid, despite protest from both women. How perfect, then, that Mrs. Marsh's childhood sweetheart should return to town and provide a decidedly secular contrast to her saintly husband. After a pivotal tea party, everyone hurtles toward inevitable tragedy, with Gardam's intricate prose and keen divining of human nature driving the action.

God on the Rocks Details

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Author : Jane Gardam

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From Reader Review God on the Rocks for online ebook

Mary says

Jane Gardam, in my experience, has never written a bad or even mediocre book.

Hugh says

Another one from the 1978 Booker shortlist. This was a very enjoyable read, but one which seems impossible to compare objectively with the last one I read, *Rumours Of Rain* - reading the two consecutively just makes you realise what a difficult job the judges have.

Set in a Northern seaside town between the wars, the first part of the book is told from the point of view of Margaret, a precocious eight-year old who is starting to see beyond the strict religious indoctrination she has been brought up with, and the story then widens out to focus on the people around her. A lovely book full of deft comic touches, warmth, wisdom and intriguing perspectives.

Warwick says

Renoir, Young Girl in the Garden at Mézy, 1891

Written in the 1970s but set forty years earlier, this is one of those quiet, revelatory novels of family secrets and childhood understanding whose sensitivity to melancholy seems so well-suited to that period in Britain between the wars.

It's a lovely novel. Though no passages of writing leapt out at me, I'm left with a strong jumble of impressions of English seaside towns, men picking through the surf with trouser-legs rolled up and knotted handkerchiefs on their head, a heavy sense of memory and lost opportunities, a productive opposition between dogmatic religious fervour and a joyous, fleshy sexuality.

Except for the charming and serious eight-year-old, Margaret, most of the people in here are obsessed with choices they made years before, looking back variously to spoiled romances, to the first War, to when they still had money, to before dementia set in. This sense of looking back is reinforced by an epilogue set after 1945, and the effect is to make all the characters seem clear but also somehow indistinct, impressionistically blurred by memory. They are not unlike figures in a Renoir painting, one of which – perhaps the one above – plays a small, pivotal role in the story. Gardam seems like a wise and generous storyteller and I will definitely read more of her.

Fiona says

Margaret is a precociously intelligent 8 year old who has been raised in a strictly religious family. She can

recite chapter and verse from the bible to cover most situations and has an insight beyond her years as well as the naïveté of a child. She weaves her way into the lives of the other characters who, as always with Jane Gardam, are a bit off the wall, particularly the delightful Lydia. It's classic Gardam through and through with lots of twists and turns along the way. I've given it 3 stars because I didn't enjoy it quite as much as some others but it's a 3+ or 4- really (for all that matters!).

Kasa Cotugno says

Thanks to the overwhelming popularity of Old Filth, Jane Gardham is at last finding her earlier works being reissued and made available. Although written thirty years before Atonement, this book shares similarities in that they both deal with how misinterpretations from the past can affect the present, and regrets for actions taken can leave unhealed wounds. Gardham releases information only as needed with an economy of purpose so there is not an unnecessary word. Her characters are filled with breadth and scope, her situations believable. She is able to shift points of view almost unnoticed, giving the story its three dimensional quality. There are also several scenes of high farce, surprising in a story seemingly so serious. Highly recommended.

Sue says

Well, add this to my growing list of Gardam books read and enjoyed. Gardam has a way of viewing everyday people and finding their warts, displaying them lovingly, and making their stories fun to read, with a combination of the comic and pathos. There are some broadly comic moments in this novel but also lots of soul searching as the characters try to figure out how their lives have led to the current point. I recommend reading and enjoying.

Carolyn Stevens Shank says

If you haven't read any of Jane Gardam's books, you are missing a real reader's delight. GOD ON THE ROCKS is one of the earlier ones. It was short-listed for the Booker Award. I became so enamored of her work after reading her trilogy: OLD FILTH; THE MAN IN THE WOODEN HAT; and LAST FRIENDS, all of which struck me as genial, humorous and wonderfully constructed. I became a "groupie," so to speak. Ms. Gardam is one of Britain's unrevealed literary treasures and her work has won numerous awards, including two prized Whitbread Awards. God of the Rocks is a coming of age story set during a summer between World Wars. Margaret Marsh, the protagonist, is a feisty precocious eight-year old, the child of a religious fundamentalist and a slightly embittered mother. What I love about Jane Gardam's books are the wonderful characters she creates. They live and breathe ... and now and then, shock us with the honesty of how they see the world. Her dialogue runs true. When I pick up one of her books, I know I am in for a jolly good time.

Nicole says

This was the first of the books I read as part of a group project to read through the 1978 Booker prize shortlist. It was surprisingly good; I think I had some mistaken idea that Jane Gardam wrote children's books and not serious lit.

The parts I liked best were those filtered through the pov of Margaret when she was a child. This strategy is something that sometimes works (Bowen's the House in Paris) and sometimes doesn't (cf. What Maisie Knew, which I found pretty terrible), but it works brilliantly here. I think part of it is that Margaret is not simply lacking in information that we have as readers, but also that she is very perceptive in other ways. She has instincts about situations even when she doesn't have quite the same understanding that an adult has, and this works very well. Her dislike (too strong a word perhaps? her distaste I almost want to say, for her mother) of her mother also has a quality that rings true as well, and is nicely handled. It's nice to see it appear at all in a work of fiction, frankly, as I think this kind of reaction and relationship may be more common than it seems from the heartfelt fiction that knows only closeness or abuse and nothing in between.

I also enjoyed the humor -- there were many moments where a situation or a well-turned phrase actually made me laugh (as opposed to thinking "oh, that's funny"). It doesn't hurt, for me anyway, that much of the humor is at the expense of the hypocritical heavy religious nutjob characters.

There were parts that seemed out of place. I'm ambivalent about them, as they were also sometimes very successful little pieces of writing in their own right. I'm thinking here of the monologue of Nurse Booth, which doesn't seem to have much to do with anything, but which is nonetheless quite successful. I feel like a longer book, perhaps something starting towards an Iris Murdoch-y kind of mode, could have incorporated this kind of thing better. As it was, there seemed to be a focus on Margaret with enjoyable but unnecessary digressions.

Other random striking things: Lydia's final monologue, so worth the price of admission. Also, the women's bodies and their connection to sex -- the recurring image was one of bigness, heaviness, of flesh straining to burst, and this was appealing to all and sundry, an irresistible sensual being which has nothing to do with the way we think or talk about sexiness today.

Theresa says

What I love about Gardam is that her characters are often surprising. There is no cheap psychology at work. They are credible because they are not predictable.

Here and there a sentence will stop you cold, like, "Still and quiet and almost looking flimsily aged at ten years old she had loved him and he had the blessing of having someone it was quite safe to hurt." This about two children who were friends.

The thing with Gardam is that the characters are so recognizable, and might reveal something about you that you had perhaps been mistaken about for many years.

Such a pleasure to read.

Mij Woodward says

I loved this book so much, I am now nonplussed, and can barely make any sense with my words of praise.

The humor, so divine. (Oops--I think I just unintentionally made a pun, considering some of the subject matter of this novel.)

The thing I love most about Jane Gardam's writing, is that she pokes fun at each of her characters. So, you have some fun, as the reader, in seeing these flaws and laughing at their foibles.

Yet while this poking fun is going on, one also cannot help but fall in love with each character, or at least, come to understand and admire them, and root for them, flaws and all.

So, that's what I did here, and devoured each page and chapter about these people, getting caught up in their personal dramas, wondering how it would all come out in the end, smiling or chuckling at every other page.

Loved how things tied together in the end.

Beautiful, beautiful little novel.

Lawrence says

I have not read a five-star book in a while and I am glad that this book was still lying around after my wife had read it and other books by Ms. Gardam.

I think of "God on the Rocks" as an understated comedy. At the beautiful, well crafted ending, loose ends in the lives of the characters, living and dead, are tied up, and life histories and resolutions are summed up. For example, the revelation of who Mr. Beezer-Iremonger actually is. For example, the fulfillment and onward movement of Charles and Elinor. For example, the return of Lydia, the Marshes' maid and the odd angel of the small group. For example, the capacity of Margaret to continue to love and the wonder of her not being a victim and of her freedom from a guilt that other writers might dwell on.

The title is an interesting one. Mr. Marsh is a major character because it is his existence that drives the current situation of the characters. The title references his religiosity and his slipping off the rock at the Eastkirk(?) beach during a finely written moment of sexual tension with the suspicious Lydia --- an event that he turns into a revival meeting. It also references the foundering of the lifeboat on the rocks where Margaret is stranded and Mr. Marsh's drowning. It references the small, neat, sometimes ridiculous, but always human, Mr. Marsh at his ridiculous and his sublime moments.

There are some lovely funny scenes. For example, the slipping off the rock, mentioned above. Also, the flight of Elinor to the house of Charles and Binkie and the remarkable loss of her clothing to a rummage sale

donation. Also, there's Lydia's pleasure at shedding her corset and brassiere at the tree. And, throughout, Margaret views all with a dispassionate eye. Just marvellous.

Definitely a keeper.

Daniel Polansky says

Ooo. Oooh! Excellent. A summer in north England between the Wars, a precocious young girl and the horrible adults who surround her; a puritanical father, a weak mother, a lascivious nanny, a bunch of other less than lovely, though sympathetic and understandable, characters. This is very well written, but rarer (at least among a lot of the books I find myself reading) it is masterfully plotted, offering the sort of narrative anticipation that high literature often feels like it doesn't need to bother with (sidenote: it is generally wrong). Excellent all around, I'll definitely keep an eye out for more by Ms. Gardam. Another library book, but I'd keep this in principal.

Laura Leaney says

An exceptional book - one that defies genre. The novel, set during one summer on the coast of England in the 1930s, focuses primarily on 8 year-old Margaret Marsh, the daughter of a bank manager who preaches the gospel on "the sands" in his spare time and a mother who is a large, soft, submissive dreamer-type. The point of view is omniscient, and although we are in Margaret's keenly intelligent world for a good long time, the story drifts (sometimes jarringly) into the minds and hearts of others, including Margaret's mother.

The impetus for much of the drama comes in the form of the h-dropping, h-adding bawdy Lydia, who has been hired to help Margaret's mother after she has a baby boy. Conversations between Lydia and Margaret are hilarious, charming, and revealing - in that much of the dysfunctional family dynamic becomes clear. I was often taken by surprise but I never experienced disbelief. Margaret, bored by the fuss over the baby, has a fascinating truth-seeking mind. She sees her parents with a tragicomic clarity. By comparison, the rest of the cast are "nutters."

Gardam's writing is lyrical and compressed. The book is very short, yet the whole of it seems an examination of religion, culture, social class, and sexuality. I think the book is a small treasure.

Chrissie says

I am going to start by advising against choosing the audiobook narrated by Maggie Ollerenshaw. Her narration got between me and the author's words. I found myself listening to the intonation rather than the specific words. I became confused about who was talking. There is a lot of dialog, and colloquialisms abound. On one hand this is good because such augments the atmosphere, but at times I failed to understand what was inferred. The intonation enhances this problem; in dialogs words are too often slurred, indistinct, mumbled or exclaimed. Probably this was done to make the dialect accurate, to show how people really would say the words, but I needed to hear those words so I could comprehend the text! Anyhow, I did end up understanding what happened, but the struggle annoyed me. The author also does not move forward chronologically. The two together added to my confusion.

I like the author's manner of writing. I am speaking of the dialog and the intermediary prose. The sentences are short and abrupt; they often leave you with the sense that more is being said than the words themselves. I like this because it is up to you to fill in the meaning. The dialogs feel genuine. This **is** how people talk! Innuendos lie under the surface and the reader must determine what is implied. How one talks is not how one writes! Both must be mastered to achieve success in a novel. The characters in this book are from different social groups and you hear this in how they express themselves. I like this too.

Jane Gardam wonderfully depicts different social groups and the atmosphere of a time and place. Here it is British provincial life between the two wars. This she does to a tee. I have filed this under historical fiction, not because it tells history but rather because it so well mirrors the life style of a group of people set in time and place. The effects of World War I lie as a blanket over all that follows. Later the book shifts forward in time and we see how all that happened in the story has shaped the future too. I like the continuity of this.

The book, through its plot and what the character say, leaves a message. Every book has to have something to say, right? Well, I like what it says, not that I can necessarily live as it says one should. (view spoiler) It leaves a message you can remind yourself of. It is something to think about. It is not hammered in.

Religion can be pushed to an extreme. A religious person might focus more on this theme, but I would widen the idea to say that most anything can be pushed to an extreme.

I am unsure to what extent the narration of the audiobook has distracted me and thus has influenced my rating of the book. I try to separate the two but am unsure if I have succeeded here. I have given the book three stars, but the narration only two. Two because I understood most of that which was said, but it detracted from my appreciation of the author's lines.

The books I have read by Jane Gardam in order of appreciation:

Bilgewater (4 stars)
Crusoe's Daughter (4 stars)
Old Filth (4 stars)
The Man in the Wooden Hat (4 stars)
God on the Rocks (3 stars)

•Karen• says

My Dad has always been a great sports fan. When I was young, the TV stayed on all Saturday afternoon, which meant that I was exposed from an early age to a litany of magical names: Plumpton, Pontefract and Newbury, Hexham, Fakenham, Taunton. The winners were even more exotic: Humble Pie beat Mother's Pride, Redhotfillypepper came in third. There was a comment at the end of every result that intrigued me as a kid. "Five ran". I was convinced it meant that five of the horses had been disqualified for running instead of galloping.

Gardam tells this tale from the point of view of eight year old Margaret, a child who also misinterprets what she hears. She and her mother are a little early for tea with Mother's much posher friend Binkie:
"I don't like to be too early"

"Oh let's" said Margaret

"No dear. She may still be changing."

"Changing!"

"Yes, dear, Binkie always changes in the afternoons."

(From what? Into what? Spiders? Fairies? Serpents?...)

And it's not just the eight year old Margaret who falls prey to the curse of the homonym. Binkie herself has a bit of a breakdown with Father Carter, and bewails her life looking after her unmarried brother - she was at Girton you know. Father Carter tries to be sympathetic:

"I'm sure it must be dull. Dull for you now. Here. It is a very great waste..."

Through her tears the words of Thomas à Kempis went straying on. 'Oh if these things had a sweet savour and pierced to the bottom of thy heart how couldst thou dare so much as once to complain?' then she thought that he had said something about her waist.

He had said that she was fat.

"I was thin. I was thin as could be," she wept, looking into his face. "At Cambridge. If you had known me then...."

It must be a sign of intelligence. Unconventional thinking. And being so sure of your own convictions that there's no need to make that clarifying query. I don't need to ask what it means **I know** what it means.

A favourite story about one of our daughters: they were brought up bi-lingually, so knew all about languages and different speakers. In German, most names of languages end in the syllable 'isch': Spanisch, Englisch, Italienisch. Once in a busy restaurant with the whole family, her cousin over on the other side of the table told a joke.

"Daniel, can you tell that one again? I didn't get it."

He asked *"Akoustisch?"*, which in German is the quick way to ask do you mean you didn't hear (acoustically) or you didn't understand?

She looked at him for a moment, and then said: *"Nein - Deutsch."*
