



A Summer Bird-Cage

Margaret Drabble

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Sarah had come home from Paris to be a bridesmaid for her sister Louise. When a child, Sarah had adored her elder sister, but Louise had grown up to be an arrogant, selfish, cold and extravagant woman. She was also breath-takingly beautiful. The man she was to marry, Stephen Halifax, was a successful novelist, very rich and snobbishly unpleasant. From Sarah's first night at home she began to question Louise's motives in this loveless match.

A Summer Bird-Cage is the story of Louise's marriage as seen through Sarah's eyes. It is also the story of a year in Sarah's own life. She is a young woman, intelligent and attractive, just down from Oxford, but completely at loose ends without close friends or a lover. What she discovers about herself is as fascinating as what she discovers about love, infidelity and her sister Louise.

A Summer Bird-Cage Details

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From Reader Review A Summer Bird-Cage for online ebook

Judy says

One of the pleasures of the 1962 list in My Big Fat Reading Project has been reading first novels by authors I have always wanted to read or authors whose later novels I have read.

Examples: Cover Her Face by P D James, In Evil Hour by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Letting Go by Philip Roth, Love and Friendship by Alison Lurie.

Margaret Drabble is the sister of A S Byatt. In the usual way of the media, much has been made over the years about their sibling rivalry. Actually both women have been outspoken about this in interviews and though both are highly acclaimed British novelists still publishing novels, they still don't get along. I get it. I have such a sister.

Another theme in novels by women published in 1962 is a growing awareness of a woman's place in society and in marriage, which would eventually become the Feminist movement, although that question has come up sporadically in novels I have read from earlier years.

Examples: The Golden Notebook by Doris Lessing, Love and Friendship by Alison Lurie, An Unofficial Rose by Iris Murdoch.

A Summer Bird-Cage falls into both categories. Sarah, the main character, is a recent Oxford graduate who is working out for herself how to fit her high level of intelligence into adult life. She can't settle on a career, she can't find a man to love, and she is watching other women for clues. Her older sister Louise has always been a torment to her.

As the novel opens, she has been called home for Louise's wedding. All the years of enmity are still there. Louise got the beauty, Sarah the brains. Puzzling to Sarah is why her sister is marrying an older successful novelist who is also a rather despicable man. Did she marry him for his money?

Over the course of a year, she sees the marriages of both her best friend and her sister fall apart as she grapples with her own identity as a woman and as an aspiring writer. The shift of power between the sisters is the most fascinating aspect of the story.

I have read countless novels about this very thing and usually find them good because the relationships between women and sisters are interesting to me and resonate with my experience. What I found exhilarating in this one was the excellent writing. Drabble (only 25 when this first novel was published) is unabashed when it comes to demonstrating her own intelligence. The tone of the writing is modern with an emphasis on dialogue that reads the way people actually talk.

I want more of Margaret Drabble!

David says

C'mon girls! Do you believe in love? Cos Margaret's got something to say about it. And it goes something

like this...

...don't marry heartless homosexual sadists for their money. Marry warm heterosexual actors who are kind to children.

(Also, be less of a bitch to your sister).

That's about it.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GsvCuz...>

Gail says

I read this on the back of Drabble's reputation and the fact I love A S Byatt's work. I was curious whether two sibling writers could inspire me equally. Well I was disappointed. Far from being a "sparkling" debut novel, as the jacket blurb promised, I found this as dry as toast.

In Byatt's *Frederica* Potter #3 novel we find her eponymous hero pondering over the fact that "young ladies just down from Oxford, ought not to write novels about young ladies just down from Oxford" and on reading *A Summer Birdcage* I felt the autobiographical pang, that so many critics have observed as existing between these two writers.

Drabble's novel was also clearly an exploration of the dichotomous adversarial relationship she has with her own sister and it's not hard to see why the two are reputed not to get along all that well. When you use your own familial relationships to form the denouement of a novel and you paint the "other" sibling in such a light as Drabble paints Louise, it's not surprising that it might sour things somewhat.

At one point in the novel Drabble claims that she could describe the clothes, the conversation, the hairstyles of those at her sister's party, but that she isn't "that sort of writer"; if I'd received this manuscript across my desk I'd have returned it with a post-it on this page suggesting she should at least try!

I'll try another Drabble novel as this was merely the slimmest of books and clearly shows the teething marks of a freshly hatched writer ... I hope the next one proves more substantial.

Lorena says

Drabble knows how to write about the complexity of sisterly love.
You don't always like the people you love.
So much truth, so much wit.

Jenny Yates says

This is Drabble's first novel, written in the 60s, and she's already a commanding writer. This one is narrated

by Sarah, a British woman in her early 20s, with a fresh degree from Oxford in hand, who simply does not know what to do with herself. She knows a few things she doesn't like (such as trains), a few things she likes (channel crossings, cars), and what everybody else thinks about everything. But she has no sense of the shape her own life might take now.

Complicating things is the fact that Sarah has spent her life trying to live up to her classically beautiful, elegant, elusive, perfect older sister, Louise. The novel begins with Sarah attending Louise's wedding, and the bridegroom is one of those things that Sarah does not like.

The novel is a little uneven, as it consists mainly of Sarah wandering around, trying on different approaches to life. She keeps bumping into Louise, or hearing news about Louise, and gradually learns the truth about Louise's marriage. Even though the plot meanders, it leaves some interesting trails behind. Sarah's is a voice that grows on you: thoughtful, self-aware, socially sensitive, and sometimes funny.

Christin says

Margaret Drabble's *A Summer Bird-Cage*, is an age-old tale of sisterhood and rivalry, and if the reviews are true, a rather bitchy portrayal of her equally brilliant sister, A.S. Byatt. Drabble's protagonist and her friends announce their education with casual references to French, Latin, and Italian, quoting Shakespeare and Keats in their correspondence, and *Paradise Lost* is Sarah's bus reading. Whereas Byatt's work imitates and skewers academia, this novel earnestly addresses the competing demands of femininity and intellectualism or what is to be done with a girl once you educate her: what options does society provide?

In the novel, the protagonist Sarah returns home from aimlessly teaching English in Paris to attend her beautiful, talented sister Louise's wedding to a boring but wealthy novelist, Stephen. Sarah cannot fathom why Louise would marry such a sour, disdainful, and unattractive man, and obviously has typical younger sibling envy for Louise, who has always made her feel unwanted and inadequate. She pities her country cousin, Daphne for being ugly and awkward. She meets her old friend from Oxford, Gill, who has just had an abortion and left her husband, Tony, a starving artist. She observes an odd tension between Louise and the best man, John, an actor. After the wedding and a guilt trip from her mother, Sarah moves to London to find a flat with Gill.

She then receives a letter from her old friend, Simone, who informs her about seeing her sister alone on her honeymoon in a Roman cathedral. Sarah is pining away for her old boyfriend, Francis, who is studying at Harvard. She tries to convince Gill to attend a party of another Oxford acquaintance for a change of pace, but Gill refuses. At the party, Sarah discovers that her brother-in-law's 1st novel is being made into a movie, starring John, and that Stephen and Louise are in Paris. Sarah dances with a man called Jackie, and then John arrives at the party, where he implies that her sister spurned him. Jackie chivalrously takes a drunken Sarah home and calls her a high-powered girl. Sarah wonders if she is like Louise.

Time passes, and Gill and Sarah bicker over their dirty flat. Louise returns to London and invites Sarah to a dinner party. Sarah recalls being rejected by a superior teenage Louise and the triumph of stealing one of her boyfriends at Oxford. Gill and Sarah fight over the dishes, with Gill chastising Sarah for pretending to be apathetic and laissez-faire about everyone's behavior. Sarah sees her poor cousin Daphne at the Tate and shamefully introduces her to a male acquaintance from Oxford, Lovell, who pities her awkwardness.

Sarah attends her sister's dinner party and marvels over her pristine home and fancy make-up. She also obsesses over her sister's over-dramatic red lipstick, and Stephen's ultra-mod Greco-inspired design palette. Sarah is clearly envious of her sister's aesthetic comforts in contrast to her squalor, though she claims to recognize her sister's vulnerability and the social pressure of having to entertain Stephen's friends. They bond briefly over Louise's luxurious French leather jacket. Sarah portrays Louise as a materialistic sylph whose only concerns are material. Sarah feels out of her depth and liberated when she finally leaves the pretentious party.

On the way home, Sarah is accosted by Stephen's friend, Wilfred, and has a snarky conversation about Louise, where she points out her own first-class degree in literature while ostensibly defending her sister's supposedly respectable second in PPE and calls her, "nothing but a novelist's wife." Wilfred points out Louise's affair with John and explains his concerns for Stephen, whom he claims has stopped writing and describes as a clinical neurotic. Sarah confesses to being scandalized by Louise's behavior and resents herself for her old-fashioned values. After several other encounters with Louise, Sarah reflects on the flippant, casual nature of their relationship, always competitors, not friends. Louise remarks that she and Sarah are carnivores, while their poor cousin Daphne is an herbivore, whom she cannot bear to entertain. Sarah, equally egotistical, reflects on the unfair burden of being attractive and Daphne's unfair burden of being ugly. While Stephen is away, Louise invites Sarah to cocktails with Stephen's Italian friends, and afterwards, they go meet John at the theatre. When they go out together, Sarah acutely feels her loneliness and status as a third-wheel, of which Louise is oblivious.

John and Louise ask Sarah about her career prospects, and Sarah admits she has no definitive plans; her job with the BBC is just a time-filler. She wants to travel and write, but she lacks the finances to do so. Louise suggests a career in academia, but Sarah feels that you "can't be a sexy don" and that being a woman prevents one from being a truly serious scholar or taken seriously by one's colleagues, even though she truly loves the pursuit of knowledge (Cf. Beatrice Nest in *Possession*). Sarah seems to be forever in transition, waiting for Francis to return, waiting for her life to start. Louise, on the other hand, has abandoned erudition in favor of creature comforts and life as an unfaithful trophy wife, shamelessly reversing traditional roles.

After John and Louise leave Sarah at home, Sarah discovers her roommate has moved home to her parents in despair. Louise phones in the wee hours and announces that Stephen walked in on she and John in the bathtub and promptly threw her out. Though Sarah resents it, she takes Louise in, and Louise admits to marrying Stephen for his money, calling him a snob and a liar. She bemoans the fate of Oxbridge friends who married for love and are now poor and miserable, saddled with children they can barely afford and whose birth essentially ruined their lives and their marriage. Louise moves in with John, and Stephen starts to write a novel with her as the villainess.

Sarah marvels that she and her sister have become "friends," but this claim is clearly undermined by her unsparing and unkind portrayal of Louise throughout, without the slightest generosity or mercy. Her disapproving, judgmental attitude toward Louise is perfectly illustrated in the final anecdote where Sarah points out that the humorous, unrepentant, absurdly heartless vanity that Louise laments not being caught in *delicto flagrante* but being caught so in her bathing cap. Throughout the novel, Sarah endeavors to present herself as the albeit unwilling conscience though she wishes she could practice moral relativism, superior to Louise in intellect and rectitude, undermining her sister at every turn for her selfish lack of mores and her bourgeois lifestyle. Bottom line: I'd be pissed too, if I were her sister.

Philip says

A Summer Bird-Cage by Margaret Drabble is a book with a hyphen in the title. This is apposite, since it presents a tale of two sisters, Louise and Sarah who, in a short but intense period of their lives, realise that there is an enduring bond between them, even if that bond may be no more than an agreement to compete.

Louise and Sarah have both been to Oxford. Louise is three years older than Sarah, who estimates that her sister is thus also three inches taller than herself. They are both beautiful, desirable young women, clearly drawn from society's existing elite and destined not to tread beyond the boundaries of their class. Sarah's first person narrative begins as she graduates, just as her older sister is about to marry Stephen Halifax. He is an awfully sophisticated author – whose books, nevertheless and by common consent, are pretty ropey – who seems permanently to roll in it, where 'it' refers to a mixture of money and whatever it is that allows an individual to claim the label 'Bohemian'. (Being born in Bohemia would not endow that status, of course. We are literary, darling, not literal!) And Louise is twenty-four, for God's sake, if we still demand His approbation in the 1960s. It is time she did something with her life, settled down, started a family, at least aspired to the respectable.

Sarah laments her sister's good fortune. For years one side of her assumed future has yearned to attach such trappings to her own life, a standpoint to which she might only occasionally admit in mixed company. There is a gentleman friend, but he has hopped it across the Atlantic for a while to do some research. She wonders if he will ever come back. In matters of the heart, the immediate is always more likely to stir the emotions.

Throughout A Summer Bird-Cage the two sisters interact and we hear Sarah's version of the envy, the bitchiness, the conflict, the resolution, the co-operation, the closeness and distance of their relationship. There are several parties where new people appear to gossip, to speculate or to provoke. Much is learned in these highly ceremonial gatherings about others.

And, as far as plot goes, that's about it. There are some flaming rows, but no-one draws a gun. There is conflict, but no-one's life is threatened. There's duplicity, but the greatest sting is committed by a taxi driver who goes off with a whole two shillings of extra and undeserved tip. But even as early as the nineteen sixties lovers would sometimes take baths together!

Via Sarah's frailties, imaginings, intellect, prejudice and eventual good sense and loyalty, Margaret Drabble presents a magnificent study in character and the human condition. If the reader were to pass Sarah on the street, not only would she be recognisable, she would immediately demand greeting. "By the way," the reader might ask her, "did you really feel such resentment at everything your sister..." And no doubt Sarah would reply at length and in detail.

In A Summer Bird-Cage the encounters are real. The events are credible. The failings of these people are purely human, rendering them completely three dimensional. Yes, the society they inhabit is rarefied, elitist and limited in its world view, but surely they existed and, via this superb novel, still do.

Courini says

As the reader Kalika says, i like that "there is a bleak pessimism towards marriage, domesticity, child-

bearing, even love that runs through out this short novel".

Emily Crow says

A Summer Bird-Cage is evidence that an author can make a novel work for me even when I find the two main characters, an insufferable pair of sisters named Sarah and Louise, neither likable nor interesting. Both are pretty and clever, recent graduates of Oxford who don't know what to do with their lives. Louise marries a snotty, rich author and Sarah moves to London and works as a file clerk while deciding what to do. Actually, the main theme of this story, of being "over-educated but without any sense of vocation," of being a thinking person adrift in a largely amoral consumer society, is certainly still relevant, and the story still feels fresh and lively fifty years after its first publication. As a whole, I liked this book.

I most certainly didn't like the sisters, however. The story is told through Sarah's POV, and for most of it, Louise is a cipher to her. They have always been competitive and don't much like each other, although they have a lot in common. They feel they are too pretty for serious employment, too smart for conventional domesticity, and too materialistic to live as bohemians. For me, they were too conceited to be likable, too shallow to be interesting and too ordinary to be glamorous. Or else just extremely immature. I wonder if Drabble intended them to be so dreadful, or if it's just me.

Lauren says

This was a sheer delight of a book and not quite a frivolous as the synopsis led me to believe, though perhaps that's more of a result of time passing and a look back at this novel, now almost 60 years old. There is much to consider about family, sibling relationships and the pros and cons of marriage. The novel does take you back though to a place in your 20s when the whole world is spread out in front of you and seems full of choices and the narrative voice of Sarah, the story teller, and her nascent feminism, is delicious.

21st c. hindsight however does make me ponder the character of Stephen - almost certainly a gay man and deeply closeted, his own life and others around him a misery. What a different world it is today and I could easily imagine the novel being told from his point of view. The sorrow there.

Rowizyx says

Mm... mi è difficile commentare questo libro sapendo che l'autrice e la sorella (che poi è una delle mie autrici preferite, Antonia S. Byatt) sono in faida da circa mezzo secolo. E questo è un romanzo - tra le altre cose - su un complesso rapporto tra sorelle. È impossibile non pensare che ci sia dell'ispirazione autobiografica dietro questo libro... Magari sbagliando, eppure il pensiero rimane lì, in sottofondo, a disturbare la lettura. È un romanzo ben scritto e molto realistico nel descrivere le donne, mi ha ricordato alcuni romanzi della Atwood, ma con una patina un poco più polverosa. Non male (ma la Byatt, nei suoi romanzi riusciti, mi piace immensamente di più).

Gabril says

Dopo la delusione della Piena, speravo di poter rivalutare mrs Drabble.

Invece l'annoia lettura di questo racconto sciapo sulla rivalità tra due sorelle, ha risvegliato in me il desiderio di tornare a leggere la talentuosa Byatt.

Pare che le celebri sorelle non leggano mai i rispettivi libri. E hanno ragione: la distanza è siderale. Addio, mrs Drabble.

Laurie says

Written in 1962, this book takes us back to the beginning of the era when women were starting to push back against the assumption that, even if they went to college, they would marry and have kids right after. Sarah, our narrator, is a bit surprised that her older sister, the stunningly beautiful Louise, is not just marrying, but marrying Stephen, a writer who is distinctly odd. The sisters have never been close, so Sarah has no idea why Louise might be marrying who she does. Stephen, an author of very literary books, does have money, but even that doesn't seem to make it all make sense. Sarah doesn't give it too much attention, though; she's having her own crisis of trying to figure out what she wants to do with her life now that she's graduated. Nothing really interests her. She might like to write a humorous novel, a la Kingsley Amis, but no idea how to go about it. She might wed but the man she might want to marry is studying in America. So she works at a job that she doesn't respect. Louise's situation catches her attention when Sarah discovers that Louise has been having an affair with John both before and after her wedding.

This is a novel that is about women in the state of dissatisfaction. Sarah is dissatisfied with her business and personal life. Louise is dissatisfied with her husband and with her lover. Their mother is dissatisfied with her own life and with theirs. Sarah's friend has just left her husband, an ultimate dissatisfaction. The men seem much happier with their lives, although we don't really get to see that much of them. It's interesting to note that all the dilemmas the women face are one's that women today still face; there was a shift in the early 60s when many more women decided to have more of a life than being married and having children but there hasn't been much change since then. I'm not sure there could be any more change; women (and men) must still face the existential question of what to do with their lives, and no matter what one does they will be missing out on something else. Although written fifty years ago, this book is a bit dated but still pertinent.

Laura says

I loved this book - this is my type of my book, my type of writer. Margaret Drabble's first novel, published in 1963 when she was 24. It tells the story of two sisters, Sarah who is our narrator, and her older sister, Louise. Both have just recently left "Ox" as they call it and have launched themselves into life - trying to work out where they belong, what options are open to them and both more or less fearful of the narrow paths of marriage and babies.

This story isn't really about plot - the ending is rather weak and not completely believable, but I certainly sympathise with both sisters; they need to make a living and as educated young women with worthy degrees,

they want to use their intelligence and skills. When asked what she really wants to do - Sarah says: '*Beyond anything I'd like to write a funny book. I'd like to write a book like Kingsley Amis, I'd like to write a book, like Lucky Jim. I'd give the world to be able to write a book like that.*'

But she is caught in a mesh of desires, balanced against practical options.

Although she is highly intelligent, she is also quite immature in some of her judgements and assessments of the people around her, this becomes clear in the chapter where she is invited to eat with Wilfred Smee a friend of her sister's husband, Stephen Halifax. Wilfred is concerned about the state of his friend's marriage and asks Sarah to sound out her sister's motivations for marrying Stephen. Sarah, however, is unable or unwilling to challenge her sister in anyway, and although she has her intuitions that the relationship is false; she cannot even remotely decipher the rationale behind Louise's decision - to marry. Sarah explains in an earlier chapter that she was constantly snubbed by Louise from the age of ten, and so there is no emotional closeness between them.

As Sarah puts it: *In the end she taught me the art of competition, and this is what I really hold against her: I think I had as little desire to outdo others in my nature as a person can have, until she insisted on demonstrating her superiority. She taught me to want to outdo her.*

So there is nothing except this intense rivalry between them. Although Sarah is bridesmaid at Louise's wedding, she does not have the confidence or insight to discuss or suggest that Louise may be making a mistake in marrying Stephen, the rich and successful novelist.

The plot unravels through various meetings and several parties and eventually the sisters are brought together through circumstances that allow each to confess their anxieties and worries about making it - as free and independent women.

There are plenty of minor characters, mostly women, who are offered as the options in life - Simone -the true bohemian, writing from Rome; Stephanie happily married with bouncy baby; cousin Daphne who is neither beautiful or clever, teaches in a Secondary Modern, and then Gill; presented as Sarah's social and intellectual equal, who is miserably in love with Tony, and miserably having an abortion because she can't stand the seediness of being married to Tony.

Sarah moves to London in search of work and is offered a flat with Gill, who has split from Tony. I think this is one of the best chapters in the whole book, it really seems to get to the heart of these young women. The girls fight over dishes and dirt, but ultimately realize they are trying to deal with the emotional demands of their high expectations: all the things they want from Life. They aspire to the higher realms, yet also need to deal with the mundane realities; earning money, negotiating equality with their men, sharing domestic duties - and it is exhausting! Gill for example cannot bare to sit around being Tony's model and have no work of her own. This is also possibly the funniest chapter.

Sarah receives a letter from her sister Louise: *...I hadn't expected to hear from her at all. And in spite of myself, in spite of all the mechanism of suspicion that had been set in motion. I was pleased. I wanted to tell Gill, so I picked up my cup of Maxwell House and went into the kitchen where I could hear her banging about. I'd thought she'd been cooking herself some breakfast, but found she was doing the washing-up from the night before. This annoyed me because, although I'd no idea of the time, I knew she was due to leave for work, and we had always said that she was to leave everything for me at the weekends, as I didn't work on Saturdays. I tried to tell from her manner whether she was being martyred or not, and decided from the way she banged the plates into the plate rack that she probably was.*

'I've had an invitation from Louise,' I said.

'Lucky you,' she said, and removed the saucer from under my cup of coffee and started to wash it up.

Oh, does Drabble deal with the realities of life - I love it.

And there is an interesting character called Jackie Almond, who is most gentlemanly and whom Sarah resists falling for as her fiance Francis is overseas in America studying for a postgraduate degree. When Jackie offers to drive Sarah home one evening after a party - she bursts into tears, she is of course fairly drunk, but the point is - that it is actually really nice to have someone to take care of you. On several occasions, she confesses how much she misses Francis.

There are so many lovely layers to this book, the relationship with the mother is included, for example, and the whole world of actors and the landscape of London, moving from Drury Lane, to Covent Garden, etc, or getting the tube at Holborn. And yet it is quite a short novel, only 208 pages, but Drabble knows how to create lively, vivid, characters, with dynamic aims, hopes and real demands on them.

All the wonderful details of 60s dresses, hairstyles and makeup - absolutely fabulous!

She was looking marvellous by any standards, wearing a kind of creamy-coloured wool dress in a curious towelling texture, neither knobbly nor hairy but a mixture of both. Perhaps it was more off-white than cream. It was obviously Italian, and my first thought was that she had brought it in one of those fearfully wordly shops that I and my friends used to pass, dusty and more or less barefoot, clutching our bottles of wine, maps, postcards of irresistible objects like the bust of Augustus, and encumbered with all the weariness and useless cockleshells of pilgrimage. It gave me a strange feeling to realize that a sister of mine had crashed into that other Rome, the Rome of the Romans.

I love it!!

Daisy says

Now, this is a period piece. Two middle-class sisters, Sarah and Louise, three years apart, in the early '60s after graduating ("coming down") from Oxford, are finding their ways in the world. This is told from younger Sarah's point of view. She's an intelligent, wry, bookish, romantic girl who's always taken second place to the more beautiful Louise. Neither one is close to the other, nor to her parents really. Louise marries a rich, boring, successful author, brings Sarah home from Paris to England for the wedding. Sarah remains in London trying to find her place in the world of the employed vs. the married-with-children friends from school. Where does she belong and why has Louise settled for this disappointment of a husband? That's what we find out in Margaret Drabble's beautiful, revealing prose.

My mother used to have shelves of Margaret Drabble. Now I know why.

Wilfred tells me that Stephen is writing another novel with Louise as a villainess: I foresee a book about a woman who is destroyed by a fatal streak of vulgarity, manifested by an inability to resist shades of mauve, purple and lilac.
