



The Shell House

Linda Newbery

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Greg's casual interest in the history of a ruined mansion becomes more personal as he slowly discovers the tragic events that overwhelmed its last inhabitants. Set against a background of the modern day and the First World War, Greg's contemporary beliefs become intertwined with those of Edmund, a foot soldier whose confusion about his sexuality and identity mirrors Greg's own feelings of insecurity.

This is a complex and thought-provoking book, written with elegance and subtlety. It will change the way you think.

From the Hardcover edition.

The Shell House Details

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Author : Linda Newbery

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From Reader Review The Shell House for online ebook

Rachael says

[maybe a thank you for the first aid(!)? (hide spoiler)]

Kristi says

I couldn't get myself to finish this book. I kept trying and trying in hopes that the novel would get better--especially with so many high reviews on Goodreads. The only plot line I found somewhat interesting was Edmund's storyline. Unfortunately, it was a minor storyline because it mostly focused on Greg and Faith.

I didn't like Newberry's writing style, which is probably one of the main reasons I put the book down. I couldn't connect with it--at times I thought the prose was too sentimental and at others too superficial. There were a lot of adverbs that evoked cliché emotions and movements. I also thought that many of the conversations between the characters, especially Greg and Faith, were unnatural and perhaps even forced. Faith is so incredibly open it's almost unbelievable--they have incredibly deep discussions for hardly knowing each other. Most people I know don't open themselves up that much that fast! Also, the repetition of the image of a "shell," which is clearly a symbol in the novel, was too obviously placed at times (so that it bordered on contrived).

I am really sad that I did not enjoy the book because I love the blend of historical and modern time frames in a novel. As I rarely choose to put a book down and stop reading, since I love to finish every book I start, I read nearly 100 pages in hopes that it would improve. Unfortunately for me, it didn't; I couldn't stand it anymore! I'm so busy at the moment and have so many books I want to read that I can no longer motivate myself to keep reading the novel--even for the intriguing Edward storyline.

Andrea says

I liked many things about this book, it was gentle and meditative and featured young people asking difficult and interesting questions, but I was never really pulled in by the story. I enjoyed it while I was reading it but could have quite happily stopped halfway through without feeling I was missing anything. Recommended for someone who wants a book to chew over, but not a particularly gripping read.

Samantha says

I really liked how she included a theme of homosexuality in the book as well as hints about religion. It's a very good book and I'd recommend it to anyone even though I had not much time to read it so I had to read it over a longer period of time than I would have liked. Also tugged at my heartstrings a few times within the chapters and left enough gaps to leave things open to interpretation. However the only reason I could not give it five stars was that there was no closure at the end and we do not know whether James and Greg ever properly made it up, though I suppose that part is really left up to the imagination.

Beth says

It is impossible not to compare this book to this year's Carnegie Award winner, for it is the perfect companion novel to Aidan Chamber's winner *Postcards from No Man's Land* (Dutton Books, 2002). Both books delve into issues of world war and burgeoning sexuality with passion, elegance and authentic characters.

In *The Shell House*, shutterbug Greg is lured to the ruins of a mansion, where he meets a girl whose family is intent on a volunteer project to restore it. Faith becomes a pillar between his internal storm between Greg's libido and his heart as he tries to figure out his sexual and spiritual identity.

Greg's story is contrasted with that of Edmund, a gay soldier who once lived in Graveney Hall whose is struggling with similar issues. An element of mystery is thrown in, as Greg and his friend the aptly named Faith are trying to discover the history of the hall and its inhabitants as they assist with the restoration.

Abundant in metaphor and symbolism, the historical detail is excellent and characters and situations realistic but bit dramatic. Still, this would be an excellent book for discussion on many levels, and a possibility for history curriculum frameworks for mature students or progressive schools.

Alex says

This book (I assume this is the audio CD?) is a very good read, bouncing between modern day and one of the world wars. The characters are amazingly deep and the two stories reflect one another.

El Templo says

"Muchas veces se ha pretendido aleccionar a los jóvenes a través de novelas "de maduración", pobladas con todo tipo de traumas adolescentes, rabietas y clichés exagerados con los que supuestamente debían sentirse identificados. Sin embargo, pocas veces se ha escrito sobre jóvenes de verdad, a los que se les permita ser espirituales, reflexivos, maduros, curiosos... "The Shell House" es una de esas excepciones. Cuando Greg, un joven aficionado a la fotografía, se topa por casualidad con las ruinas de una antigua mansión del siglo XVIII, Graveney Hall, se siente inmediatamente cautivado por el misterio de su destrucción. Indagar en la historia de los Pearson, la familia a la que perteneció, y sobre todo de Edmund, el hijo de la familia que fue enviado a luchar al frente durante la Primera Guerra Mundial, donde desapareció y fue dado por muerto, revelará a Greg mucho más sobre sí mismo de lo que esperaba. Las historias de Greg y Edmund se entretajan con sorprendente sencillez y efectividad en una novela realista, profunda y apasionada que da mucho que pensar. => Sigue leyendo la reseña en <http://www.eltemplodelasmilpuertas.com>"

Ms. Wietecha says

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Kate says

This book was very enjoyable as a whole. I liked the different perspective from Edmund the most. (I think most people did.) I, myself being LGBT, really liked the simple love between Edmund and Alex. There wasn't really much "oh no, we're both men this is so wrong" that was shown/told between them. They were just two guys, wholly and beautifully in love with each other.

I also liked the arguments Greg had with Faith. I agreed with practically everything Greg was saying, since I am an atheist as well. Faith, as Greg said, "*knew her lines*" and therefore had an answer to everything. He was just so puzzled and simply frustrated at her answers, as if there was no thought to them. I liked it because Greg was saying things I wanted to debate about with some of my very religious friends, but I can't because I simply don't have the guts to get into a full blown argument.

Greg and I are very similar too. ~~Sorry, I keep talking about myself here.~~ Greg's an aspiring photographer, doubts there really is a God, loves history, loves ruins and is not straight. Me, basically.

Enough about that, there were a couple of things that were a bit displeasing.

The ending. Vague. No conclusion. One of the main reasons I really enjoyed the book was because of Greg's path of self-discovery, and yet we don't even know who he is really attracted to. Is he gay? Is he bisexual? That's what he might have been in my opinion, based on the ending. No conclusion with Jordan either. Nothing with Dean, too. Although vague endings can sometimes be fun, this was just frustrating. Your sexual orientation/sexuality is an important part of who you are, and it was just left hanging in the book.

Some things were also a bit abrupt. For example, Jordan's revelation to Greg that he was gay and that he liked Greg. It kind of felt as if that came out of nowhere. That might have been since the modern perspective was that of Greg, and maybe he doesn't have the best gaydar. Still. The way Jordan spoke about Greg felt as if these guys had had super intimate experiences with each other, Jordan knowing his feelings and Greg the opposite. Jordan's really good at hiding things then.

Faith's loss of faith (hAHa- no) was also sudden. She just suddenly told him "lol nope I don't believe in the guy whom I've so strongly believed in in my entire life anymore who was also a major part of it and happened to be linked to my damn name". It would've been a bit better if she and Greg had kept speaking and she could have been at a loss for words about something. Doubting her belief silently at first and then finally telling Greg when she had sorted herself out. Atleast showing us a bit of her doubt. Hmph.

Greg's actions after he maybe figured out something about himself were a bit silly. Like, *"No way am I gay/attracted to guys. Just because I felt some sort of intimate connection that felt somewhat romantic to another man doesn't indicate that. Hah. I like girls and I always have. It just happened to be what I've been told to do for my whole life. I'm a guy and therefore I have to have sex with girls to be me."* Uhm, okay. Calm down there, Greg. That reaction has just been told too many times before. Have a little sit down and think about it, okay dude? Figure yourself out quietly.

I rate this 4 out 5 stars for its interesting topics, specifically about sexuality and religion; lgbt relationships (somewhat angsty from the death of the partner that died IN BATTLE and not from suicide or some sh*t); revelations/self-discoveries and the bits of history it had.

Jeff says

This book didn't go far enough. Engaging and fascinating at times, it had so much potential it ignored..

Joanne says

Originally posted on Once Upon a Bookcase.

When I was first sent this to review, I wasn't sure if it would be my cup of tea. As you may have read, I'm generally not a fan of historical novels, so that aspect didn't appeal to me, especially as it was about the First World War. And I wasn't too sure about Greg's fascination with the house either. The story just didn't much appeal to me. I decided to give it a go anyway. I'm so glad I did, it's awesome!

A budding photographer, Greg takes an interest in the dilapidated stately home Graveney Hall, seeing beauty where others see ruin. When he looks more into the history of the house and it's destruction, he discovers Edmund Pearson, the heir to the home, died mysteriously around the same time the house was destroyed in a fire. Edmund Pearson was a soldier in the First World War, and Greg is determined to find out what happened to him. As we learn more about Edmund's story, similarities between his and Greg's lives are brought to light; for neither boy lives a life without difficulty.

The Shell House is a dual narrative, going back and forth in time the roughly present day and First World War, following the lives of Greg and Edmund. Greg is a sixth former with an interest in photography who finds a new friend in Faith, the daughter of a Friend of Graveney Hall who are doing the home up, and discovers he's seeing his friend Jordan in a new light. Twenty one-year-old Edmund is fighting in the First World War, where he met Alex, the man who opened his eyes to what love is. He is struggling to work out how to live the life he wants, with Alex, when he is expected to come home, take over Graveney Hall, marry and produce a new heir. Edmund wants a life of love, but has been born into a life of responsibility.

Greg is a photographer, Edmund is a poet. So each chapter, depending on who's it is, is opened with a description of a photo - a photo Greg took, a photo that Greg would have taken if he had his camera on him, or a photo he's seen - or a poem written by Edmund. The photos and poems relate to what happens in each chapter, and they give you a fantastic insight into the personality and feelings of each character.

Although their stories are very different, both characters experience similar things. There are questions of sexuality and religion, which also plays a huge part in the story, for both characters. Edmund was a believer who lost his faith, Greg was an atheist who starts to question. I find it interesting how differently Edmund and Greg view their sexuality. Edmund lives in a time where homosexuality is completely unacceptable but has no issues with his sexuality and is happy in his love for Alex.

"I'm not really joking," he said, turning his head towards Alex. 'I mean it. I can't imagine a future without you.' Alex looked down at him and said softly, "Nor I". At moments like this, Edmund had the sense of everything settling into place. This, then, was love - not love as his father wanted it, all tied up with property and respectability and procreation. This was love that demanded nothing but itself.' (p93)

Where Greg, on the other hand, lives in a time where people are more accepting (though, granted, not as accepting as we could be) but has such difficulty coming to terms with and admitting the things he's feeling.

'Into his mind, vivid and disturbing, slipped the moment yesterday morning in the changing room when Jordan had turned and looked at him. It had only taken an instant, but there had been a sort of connection. An exchange, an unspoken understanding. He had stared openly at Jordan as he stood there naked; he had gazed for too long, and Jordan had seen and not minded. Jordan's glance had seemed to say: I know. It's all right. God, what am I thinking? Is he - am I - does he think - do I--' (p176)

'Greg walked back slowly, kicking at leaves, thinking about Jordan. I am not gay, he told himself. Not even remotely. Just because I--Just because he's always on my mind. Just because I'd rather be with him than with anyone else. Just because it's enough to be together, not even talking. Just because he obviously likes me the same way. Again, Greg thought of that glance, of what had seemed like a current running between them. But what had Jordan actually said? Hi. Ready in a couple of minutes, if you don't mind hanging on. Definitely not the words of someone who had just experienced a blinding revelation. Male bonding, Greg decided, that's all.' (p178)

That's not to say Edmund doesn't have his own issues regarding his sexuality. His problems are more to do with outsiders' views and his faith.

'And Edmund, unable to reconcile his Church of England upbringing with what he had discovered about his sexual leanings, had been glad to discard God. Now, though, in his desperation, he yearned for the comfort of a father-figure who would listen and heed and intervene. He closed his eyes and tried to pray as he had never prayed before...Alex's suffering was a punishment for his homosexuality. And his own punishment was this: to be forced to stand by, helplessly, while his lover passed through torment and out of his reach.' (p115-156)

"Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind; it is an abomination!" the Reverend Tilley quoted fiercely. "So it is written in the Book of Leviticus. And what is wrong in God's eyes cannot be made to seem right or justifiable, whatever the situation. I will not listen while you make excuses for your sin - if it is repulsive to me, imagine how much more repulsive it is to the Lord! You must realize, man, that not only is it morally repugnant, it is also a crime in the eyes of the law! Have you no shame?"" (p304-305)

These two passages show something I find really difficult to deal with. I myself am an atheist, but have nothing against religion and love people with strong faith. As I've been reading these books for LGBTQ YA Month, I've found myself worrying about young religious teens who are questioning their sexuality, and don't know how to reconcile what they feel with what they believe. I genuinely worry, because, god, what a position to be in! The thoughts they may be thinking! It hurts my heart, it really does. And then there are the religious people who treat gay people absolutely disgustingly, and they make me so angry! I may disagree with the views, but everyone has a right to their own opinion. However, no-one has the right to force their opinions and beliefs on another, whether it be preaching at me as an atheist, or scornfully telling an LGBTQ person that the way they live their life is wrong. It makes my blood *boil*. But back to the book...

There comes a point when conversations have to be had, and Greg can't keep his confusion to himself. Greg is flawed, he does some downright awful things at times, but it comes from fear and uncertainty, and I just wanted to give him a hug. Especially when Jordan comes out to him, and they have this conversation.

"You didn't answer just now when I asked if you minded." "No. No, I don't mind. But if you're asking if I'm gay--" Jordan nodded, waiting. Greg shook his head. "I've never thought so. But it's doing my head in. I mean I fancy girls. I don't know any more - it's weird, all this--" "All this what? What's doing your head in?" "This is. You are. I think about you all the time." Greg's mouth wrenched itself into a grimacing smile; he shook his head, looking down at his clasped hands. "What's funny?" "Can't believe what I just said."" (p210-211)

The Shell House discusses faith and spirituality as much as it does sexuality. For the most part, despite what I quote above, it's a separate discussion to what religion says about sexuality, it's more a discussion about whether God exists or not. There are so many different views shared, it's just so fascinating. Greg uses scientific advances and discoveries as reasons for there not being a God, but there are also thought out, believable arguments for the non-existence of God in Edmund's time, too, when scientific advancement is yet to come into play. It's less about religion, and more about belief, what each character believes to be true. Both sides of the argument are represented so well, I couldn't tell you whether Newberry is religious or not.

The Shell House is beautifully written. Some passages are just so deliciously put together, you want to read them out loud. Sometimes poetic, always gorgeous. The imagery is beautiful, and there are certain ideas the characters have, on love, on sex, on words, that really resonated with me because they are so like my own, but expressed in a way I would never have been able to. I have literally been copying out sections for myself, to read whenever I wish. If I was going to give this book one criticism, despite the beautiful language, Greg and Jordan used language that is a little old fashioned for present day; I don't hear teens saying "Blast!", "You little oik!", or "Damnation!" There is some swearing in the book, so it's not as if they're used instead of swear words. It just seemed a little strange and jarring.

The Shell House is an amazing story, about people, about a house, about love, sexuality and faith. A beautiful, wonderful story, and one I would highly recommend!

Thank you to RHCP for the review copy.

Lori says

This book's writing style is very florid and sentimental. I knew from the summary that it probably would be. I thought by biggest complaint would be the writing style, but to my disappointment, sentimentality is the least of what made me want to throw this book at a wall. Most of the dialogue during the present times felt ridiculously staged, Edmund got to the point where he was so scornful he became a flat and unrelatable character, and the ENDING. This is the angriest I've been at the ending to a book since *Mockingjay*.

SPOILERS

The book opens with Greg the high school photographer stumbling upon a pretty, decaying mansion. Graveney Hall. (Can you tell how happy this place is? I bet the family was kind and loving and never judged anything ever.) This symbolic naming of things for their rolls in the story continues with Faith, the girl Greg meets by chance there. She's a devout Christian (what? Really????) and becomes the irritating, stereotypically self-righteous religion character that makes Greg question his atheism. She's also the token Independent Woman. (If I'm bitchy and snotty enough to you in the beginning, everyone will believe I'm my own person and root for us to be together when I eventually kiss you!) His relationship with Faith becomes the main plot line, despite what the summary says.

Greg and James talk a little in the beginning, have a little spat, and practically nothing else happens between them for the rest of the book. Yep. Oh, Greg considers the IDEA of James a lot, often comparing him to another girl he meets (a flat character that purely exists so that he can feel guilty about sex). But Greg is much happier talking to Faith about Edmund and religion than talking to James. I actually like James, even though he's as mild as most of the other characters. Too bad Faith is more important.

Now, Edmund. The World War I plot is more interesting, mainly because Edmund is a bastard instead of a lukewarm character like Greg. Alex's death is well-done. Even though I saw it coming from a mile away, it still felt awful and sad. Even after Alex's death, when Edmund is crazy and way too ridiculously mean to his pretty neighbor, (I mean really. No one would be THAT awful) I still found it more interesting than Greg's life. At least Edmund is a horrible person.

Now you would think, with all of this religious lead-up, there would be some sort of religious closure at the end. I did, anyway. Instead we get this cross crap with Faith. Greg feels guilty because he believes he made her lose her faith. I get it. That part is interesting. He takes her cross for safe-keeping to make sure she doesn't throw it away.

Then we get a dream illustrating how Greg is struggling to choose between sex or love with the random girl and James, and Greg goes to swim with James but doesn't talk to him. Heaven forbid the two actually hint at something concrete between them. You can easily read this scene as James accepting that Greg is only a friend and nothing more, which would be fine if we weren't given glaring evidence in the form of the dream that Greg does NOT feel that way. Unless he chose sex over love. I don't know. Greg doesn't say. Or tell James. For one of the main couples of the book, these two sure suck at communication.

And then Greg is threatening to throw the cross into the water, trying to get Faith to stop him. The real climax--his relationship with Faith. Pun intended. And we get this ambiguous-ass sentence that could either be him throwing it in the lake or him stopping it from falling in the lake.

And it ENDS. With NO closure between him and James, NO closure between him and Faith, but hey, at least we finally know who burned down the freaking MANSION because I totally didn't know it was Edmund fifty pages in!!!

Hannah says

This book started off so well, which was why I was generous and gave it three stars, but it seemed to get very strange towards the end.

I loved the character Faith, who was so original, but then by the end of the book she was trusting all normal and boring! She had the belief that many others her age didn't have, and she had such interesting opinions, but at the end it all changes and I really hated that.

Then Greg. At the beginning of the book I thought that he and Faith would end up being together, which, however predictable, should have been so sweet, and they would have made awesome partners! But then... you know the feeling you get when you want to die because you are drowning in the realisation that this book is just going down hill? For goodness sake! It felt like the author just went, "Oh! Things are getting complicated, so I'm going to 'surprise' my readers and make my main character gay! Whoopee!!!! Everything is sorted now! Oh, and just to make things even stranger, I will make him like his best friend... who, guess what... is also gay!" This made me want to throw the book on the floor and scream. (But I managed to contain myself... just.) Actually, I found this so annoying that I stopped reading the book for three weeks while I adjusted. Afterwards, it wasn't too bad when you finally got used to the gay part, but it was still disappointing. Well never mind.

Rachel says

Interesting. Main modern character is not resolved enough in the end and the ending leave you wanting. The modern and historic characters are not connected enough. But it is compelling. Note content in this book may not be suitable for all readers

Sally Flint says

A thoroughly enjoyable read. I seem to be in a bit of a war phase at the minute and I loved the way the life of Edmund and Alex in the trenches was paralleled, in some ways, by Greg and Jordan's modern life. Both historical periods were portrayed really realistically with dialogue completely convincing for the time. The switch between narrative voices seemed seamless - I was left wondering, was it in fact the same narrator (well I know it was as in writer, but ...), I kept thinking of Edmund if only he could go be treated by Rivers in Regeneration he would have been fine; the outcome would have certainly have been less dramatic! The central theme amongst the modern duo of accepting who they were was cleverly explored. Greg's aggression

and hostility that he showed at times was really powerful. This book explores so many important issues, class, relationships, religion, the very purpose of existence; an astute and intelligent teenager would love it. I really think it would be a wonderful class text as the language is beautiful too, Hardy's poem held things together brilliantly. If only it was published with a trendy cover it would be a massive seller. I haven't read so many books that are so powerful and still have plenty of action, violence and romance. Top read for me.
