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Wilkie Collins

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Wilkie Collins's intriguing story about a blind girl, Lucilla Finch, and the identical twins who both fall in love with her, has the exciting complications of his better-known novels but it also overturns conventional expectations. Using a background of myth and fairy-tale to expand the boundaries of nineteenth-century realist fiction, Collins gives one of the best accounts in fiction of blindness and its implications.

Poor Miss Finch Details

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Author : Wilkie Collins

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From Reader Review Poor Miss Finch for online ebook

~ Cheryl ~ says

SUCH mixed feelings about this book.

On the one hand, there were some wonderfully amusing characters:

Mr. & Mrs. Finch, the main character's parents – one a self-important windbag who was so much fun to dislike; the other, a “damp woman” in the perpetual state of nursing a new baby, forever misplacing her handkerchief. Herr Grosse, a German eye surgeon who works with “poor Miss Finch” – his natural exuberance combined with his broken English made him consistently entertaining. And most importantly, Madam Pratolungo, widow of a French patriot whose memory she still celebrates. It is Madam Pratolungo who narrates this tale in the first-person (thank goodness!), and inserts her *Vive la Republique* personality into every inch of it. Some of her asides and remarks made me laugh out loud! She is a wonderful creation, and I loved listening to her.

On the other hand, the story just didn't compel me, though it should have. Miss Finch is a 21-year-old blind woman, and Collins writes some very interesting and realistic scenes concerning her predicament. (As well as one or two profound concepts about blindness vs. sightedness.) But as a character I found her mostly petulant and grating. Since the bulk of the story revolves around not only her disability, but her social life and her suitors, after a while reading it felt like a chore ... (or that could just have been my mood).

(...although, the last couple of chapters and the epilogue went some distance toward redeeming it. They made me nod, and smile, and *feel*.)

As Victorian writers go, Wilkie Collins is generally accessible and entertaining. This time was no different, but all the 2-star and 4-star moments in this book have caused me to be ambivalent. While I mainly liked it, I'm not sure I would re-read it in the future.

Julia says

All of the other Wilkie Collins novels I have read have been mysteries; this story is a fascinating family drama, told by a widowed French woman, the colorful employed companion of Miss Lucilla Finch, a young blind woman. They live in their own apartment within her father, the bombastic Rev. Finch's, home. Her family includes a befuddled step-mother, mother to at least a dozen rollicking children. Miss Finch falls in love with a young man, new to the neighborhood. He has an identical twin brother, and both brothers fall in love with her. The characters are incredibly interesting and masterfully described. The story is full of humor, lies, deception, opinionated eye-doctors, adventures, letters, notes, betrayal, and forgiveness. It is full of intriguing insights into the life of a blind person. (I listened to this book as a free download from Librivox.org, and then found out that the delightfully talented reader is blind herself).

bup says

Golly this was terrible.

Here's a snippet from the goodreads short bio of Collins: "...after his death, his reputation declined as Dickens' bloomed. Now, Collins is being given more critical and popular attention than he has received for fifty years."

Well, we can stop again. The verdict is in.

He wishes he had a point of conflict for this novel. The principles in here - a woman who's been blind since age one, another woman who's the widow of a revolutionist, and a guy who escaped the hangman's noose after he was all but convicted of a crime, *and* has seizures as a result of being hit in the head while robbed - are now hand-wringing because the blind girl *dislikes dark things*.

A good slapping party could have ended this book about page 50. Get over it! *slap* You! Tell her you took silver nitrate because your stupid Victorian medicine thought it was good for seizures! *slap* Then tell her to get over your blue skin! *slap* You! Stop playing along with all their histrionics! *slap*

I mean, seriously. It's *almost* bad enough to enjoy hating all the characters, like a one-star horror movie, but it's not quite that bad so it's enjoyable. Plus, it's way too long to read with sustained irony.

And the guy flatters himself in the preface as a good observer of human nature! Nobody ever behaved the way these people did!

He also is a tiring and uninteresting turner of phrase.

And unable to say something other than what he means. Where Dickens or Austen would have a money-obsessed jerk like the reverend in this book talking about how a moneyless marriage prospect was *disagreeable*, or *indolent*, or *anything but poor*, that's beyond Collins. It's so dull.

Two small exceptions. The reverend's wife was a damp lady. He's not terribly clever about it, but it's there. And the German doctor is obsessed with mayonnaise. Kind of funny.

But I can't end with that, because the upshot is I want you leaving this with the message Collins is terrible. So let me add he probably had Hummels adorning his house.

Betsy says

The story is as melodramatic as one could wish of Collins, though there are no ghosts, cursed gems, or drugs -- simply very messy human hearts.

I have to give this four-star plot the extra star because the narrator Mrs. Pratolungo, the fiery French widow with revolutionary leanings, and the companion to Poor Miss Finch, is a scream.

Her commentary on the other characters, while being frankly open about her failures and short temper, are what make the book.

At a most dramatic scene near the end of the novel, Mrs. Pratolungo is outraged that she is mistaken for the young hero's mother, rather than as his older sister.

She confesses, "What a picture of perpetual self-contradiction I present -- and how improbable it is that I should act in this illogical way! YOU would never alter your mind under the influence of your temper or your circumstances. No: you are, what they call, a consistent character. And I? Oh, I am only a human being -- and I feel painfully conscious that I have no business to be in a book."

She says at one particularly trying moment, "I sat down with my legs anyhow, like a man. I rammed my hands into the pockets of my dressing-gown. Did I cry? A word in your ear -- and let it go no farther. I swore."

After being sorely tried and tested, for 400+ pages, by the exasperating Reverend Finch, she says, after being referred to by him as a "good creature" ... "much as he might have patted, and spoken to, Oscar's companion, if the companion had been a dog. I almost wished myself that animal for the moment -- I should have had the privilege of biting Mr. Finch." Later, she observes, "If I had been Mr. Finch's wife, I believe I should have ended in making quite an agreeable man of him."

Mrs. Pratolungo is exceptionally good company. Make her acquaintance!

John says

A real must-read for fans of Victorian melodrama. Poor blind Miss Finch gets caught up in a drama between identical twin brothers, her incredibly pompous father is of no use, and her batty German ophthalmologist cares as much for his chicken salad lunches as he does for her! Who can save her you ask? Why - her companion, Madame Pratalungo, the omniscient narrator of events, now one of my favorite characters in this genre!

The Librivox (free!) audio version is narrated by a blind woman herself, who can switch voices effortlessly, capturing every nuance of the personality.

Sarah Nealy says

I have to say this is my favorite Wilkie Collins book! It has romance, mystery and suspense and you get to be inside the story and feel what the characters feel especially the blind Miss Finch, you really get to feel what it feels like to be blind. This book also has to do with vanity, and how we can get caught up in looks and not know really what's inside a person, and what's inside is what really counts and Miss Finch the main character finds that out.

Simon says

Took me quite a while to get into this novel. That was my experience of *No Name* as well. In fact, that was my first and almost my last experience of Collins. I nearly gave up on it and then suddenly found the pages turning themselves as I was hurtled along. This grabbed hold of me eventually but its hurtling grip was never quite as strong as for *No Name* and nowhere near as strong as for *The Moonstone* or *Woman in White*. (Mind you those two are very bright stars in the firmament of Victorian Literature.)

This would be the Wilkie Collins that I would place on my reading list for a 19th Century Novel course. The elements are more open and there are a lot of them. This would make a great seminar novel for students who are beginning to build up their own maps of the landscape of English literature and its recurring features. You can cross reference this novel with Hardy, with Shakespeare, with Locke and Berkeley, with Dickens and they are just the names I've thought of while typing this sentence.

I strongly recommend the introduction to the Oxford World Classics edition. This essay by Catherine Peters covers everything (and more) that I might have to say about the novel. It does what I like in a review which is to make me think that my own thoughts, as I was reading the book, had some validity. The fact that I like it because I agree with it doesn't necessarily make it a good essay but it saves me the effort of writing a long review.

My usual rules for judging a book include:

Did I enjoy it? Yes, eventually

Would I read it again? Possibly

Did I believe it? Not really but then I don't think you are supposed to. This is the *Silas Marner* end of Victorian literature where storytelling means just that and embraces the whole culture. If *Silas Marner* is in some senses a re-telling of *Rumplestiltskin* (or *Tom Tit Tot* to give the story its English derivation) then *Poor Miss Finch* is *Beauty and the Beast*.

Is there more to it than just the story? (Apart from the dangerously pejorative word, 'just') I'd say an undoubted yes. This volume has enough to keep the literary philosophers happy for a seminar or two themselves.

Would I recommend it? To a fan of Dickens and Collins. Yes. To the student, see above. To the general reader unfamiliar with the works of Wilkie Collins I'd say read *The Moonstone* and (particularly) *The Woman in White* first.

Katie Lumsden says

I really enjoyed this one - a very interesting and compelling novel, especially in the second half. I especially found the way it looked at Lucilla's blindness and Oscar's disfigurement really interesting. Would definitely recommend!

Alasse says

Meh.

This is a book that features a bunch of awesome characters. There's a French governess with radical

Communist views, a blind girl with weirdly racist tendencies, a set of twins (one of whom has blue skin), a peculiar German oculist who won't wash and is named Grosse (tee hee hee). There's even a five-year-old girl who runs away from home at every opportunity and stands against robbers if they laugh at her.

This is typical Wilkie Collins material - charming, interesting characters against a background of mistaken identities, recovered eyesights, dashing against-the-clock rescues, and unrequited love.

The only problem is, for the first 300 pages, NOTHING HAPPENS. (How is this even possible? There is so much great material there!). Just lots of buildup.

Then something happens.

Then nothing again, then some more buildup happens, then everything happens on the last 30 pages. Then done.

They call them sensation novels for a reason, you know?

Brian says

A delightful book! Wilkie Collins through his diligent research for the groundbreaking theme of this book and the colourful characters within it, proves he is a master of Victorian literature. The story begins in Dimchurch, England which Miss Finch, her arrogant clergyman father and stepmother of twelve children reside. Mrs. Pratolongo, a dignified woman was hired to teach Miss Finch the piano. She became her best friend and confidant. Mrs. Pratolongo adored Miss Finch for her beautiful qualities and admired her for being happy despite her blind affliction.

Enter Mr. Oscar Dubourg, a young man of weak character, easily rattled by pressure, overly sensitive and very shy. Upon hearing his voice Miss Finch falls in love with him. The more they talked the more they fell in love. Unfortunately Oscar was attacked and was administered Silver of Nitrate that controlled his seizures for the price of a distinct bluish disfigurement. Aware of his bride to be's affinity to dark colours he begged Mrs. Pratolongo to silence and intended to tell Miss Finch before the wedding.

The story becomes all the more interesting when Oscar discovers his twin brother Nugent brings an eye surgeon, the colourful Herr Grosse. Nugent is the opposite of Oscar in disposition, confident, flamboyant with a magnetic personality. As Nugent sees more of Miss Finch he falls in love with her too. Oscar indebted to his brother for saving his life by exonerating him in a murder trial and an overly high opinion of him agrees to leave England giving him the chance to win her love. At this part of the book Wilkie Collins tries to convince the reader of a role reversal between the brothers. Nugent becomes increasingly devious to deceive Miss Finch by impersonating Oscar in his mannerisms and even his handwriting. The German eye surgeon is successful, thus increasing the pressure on Nugent even more for her to marry him before her eyes can be trained. His scheming takes a toll on him as he becomes moody, unsure, at times breaking down in tears.

Miss Finch is so distressed of the inconsistencies and the fact that she can not feel by holding Nugent's hand the warmth of love she once did. Such pressure for her to marry and her doubts causes her to lose her sight. Oscar was tracked down by Mrs. Pratolongo and they hurried to stop the wedding. While he was away he had more under the surface than anyone thought. His character became reserved, confident, decisive even

more when he learns of all the devious scheming his brother had done. They arrived in time to expose Nugent for the fake he is and Oscar and Miss Finch marry happily in the end.

Footnote: I was blessed with a fantastic preface that made several compelling points as to why "Poor Miss Finch" should be among his best books such as "Women In White". Of the perhaps a dozen cases of sight restoration, the distinct pattern of the difficult journey of retraining a person to understand distances, sizes of objects, a dog from a cat which is mentioned in the book for example. The press heavily criticized this book on his research most likely from eye surgeon William Chelston who noticed the same things, even a horror of dark colours. Some have committed suicide for the world was so scary for them like the recent case in the 90's. The press attacked "Miss Finch's" character in the book comparing her to a lifeless doll. From reading this book that is preposterous as she is sensitive, intelligent and insightful. "Poor Miss Finch" has stood the test of time regarding his research and his gracious theme that one can live with a debilitating affliction like blindness and be happy.

Nanci Svensson says

In this novel, using the classic Cyrano de Bergerac-plot of tiresome identity confusion, Wilkie Collins utterly fail to raise any other feeling in this reader than irritation. Granted, some of the implausibility of the plot may be attributed to the medical knowledge at the time Collins' wrote this, but jeeze... There is not one rational action taken by anyone in this book. WORST EPISODE EVER, as comic bookstore guy would put it.

Martine says

Wilkie Collins is one of my favourite Victorian authors. *Poor Miss Finch* isn't the great classic that, say, *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White* are, but it has some classical Collins features, such as mistaken identities, outrageous plot twists, grave deceit and fairly extreme characters. The story centres on Lucilla Finch, a blind girl who falls in love with an unambitious but pleasant (albeit blue-faced) young artist. Through a medical miracle, Lucilla regains her sight, only to mistake her lover's twin for her fiance himself. Lots of intricate twists ensue. Told from Lucilla's outspoken French governess' point of view, this is an enjoyable tale exploring the themes of blindness, love and trust.

Helen says

Having read all four of Wilkie Collins' most popular books (*The Woman in White*, *Armadale*, *No Name* and *The Moonstone*), I am now exploring his less popular novels. This one, *Poor Miss Finch*, was published in 1872 and unlike most of the books that preceded it, is not really a 'sensation novel', although it does have certain sensational elements (mysterious strangers, theft, assault, letters being intercepted, mistaken identities etc). It's actually an interesting study into what it's like to be blind since infancy and the emotions a person experiences on learning that there may be a chance of regaining their sight.

This book handles the topic of blindness in a sensitive and intriguing way. It's obvious that Collins had done a lot of research into the subject and the results are fascinating. He discusses the theory that when a person is blind their other senses improve to compensate for their lack of sight and he weighs up the advantages and

disadvantages there would be if this person then regained their sight. I had never even thought about some of the aspects of blindness that are mentioned in the book.

The characters, as usual, are wonderful - most of them anyway. Lucilla, the 'Poor Miss Finch' of the title, is not very likeable (she has a tendency to throw foot-stamping tantrums when she doesn't get her own way) but I loved Madame Pratolungo - she was such an amusing and engaging narrator! We also meet Reverend Finch, Lucilla's father, who chooses to recite Hamlet at the most inappropriate moments, and his wife, Mrs Finch, who is 'never completely dressed; never completely dry; always with a baby in one hand and a novel in the other'. With Lucilla's little half-sister Jicks, Collins even makes a three year old girl into an unusual and memorable character.

Although I thought parts of the plot felt contrived, the story did become very gripping towards the end. This was an interesting and thought provoking read, and if you have enjoyed any other Wilkie Collins books, then I suspect you might enjoy this one too.

Brad says

What are you looking for in your next book? Twins swapping identities? Crazy disproved medical cures? A horny old man? People breeding like rabbits? A blind racist? The heartbreakin origin story of the Blue Man Group? Mayonnaise?

Well, if you answered "yes" to any of those questions, you're in for a treat with Poor Miss Finch! Wilkie Collins is known for his part in creating the "sensation novel", and here is does his best to live up to the hype.

The problem with Poor Miss Finch is that there is a pulse-pounding race to prevent a disaster, and when the showdown occurs, I was looking for a little more excitement. Imagine if Snow White ended with the Evil Queen getting caught giving Snow White the poisoned apple, and her reply was a sheepish smile and the word "Oops." Then all the dwarfs share a knowing look and erupt in laughter at that crazy queen, who in turn disappears into the woods. Bullshit, right?

Even at his worst Wilkie Collins is more palatable to me than Charles Dickens, Collins generally plunges head first into the action of the story while Dickens will spend forty pages describing a tree. Collins is light entertainment, and while a lot of his plots are ruined by science, it can be a fun ride. Poor Miss Finch is thus far my least favorite Collins novel, but I still found plenty of enjoyment in it.

FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO READ NOVELS THAT ARE OVER 150 YEARS OLD, WATCH OUT FOR SPOILERS

My new favorite name may be Madame Pratolungo, but as the character who narrated the story she was pretty one dimensional. Lucilla was the title character, but for a blind woman, she wasn't too likable outside of her affliction. Oscar Dubourg was boring, and Nugent was obviously insane. I would have had more respect if Oscar had shot Nugent it would have saved him from being frozen to death which was a pretty ho-hum way to die. The story should have been called Poor Mrs. Finch because Lucilla's stepmother, who was eternally pregnant, should have gotten everyone's pity with her life with that blowhard of a husband.

My Revisions

Lucilla should have hysterically grabbed Oscar's gun and shot Nugent herself. Then Madame Pratolungo could have taken the heat. She didn't have much of a life anyway. It would have been a little more exciting.

Mr. Finch suffers a severe groin injury in the first chapter rendering him incapable of fathering any other children. Mrs. Finch finds her handkerchief, dries her dampness and goes on to become the first female oculist in all of England.

Herr Grosse gets out of the eye business and with the recipe of Madame Pratalungo becomes a mayonnaise tycoon!

Sylvester says

Collins can really bait a hook. The scene where Mme. Pratalungo first meets Miss Finch is a perfect example of how to draw a reader in and hold them. Nor does he shy away from the sensational - a blind heroine, a set of twins, and an extraordinary side-effect to medication? I couldn't help wondering what a blind person would think of the portrayal of Lucille. I haven't read many books with a blind protagonist. What Lucille said about "seeing" people giving too much importance to their sense of sight is probably quite true - not that sight isn't important, but that we neglect to appreciate the significant value of the other senses by comparison.

The story brought up a few questions - are twins' voices identical? Is their handwriting really the same? Wouldn't they smell different? (I have this probably erroneous idea that a blind person might be better at telling identical twins apart - not being distracted by visual cues.) After "No Name", this book was a let-down for me. (But then, "No Name" was awesome.) You can only know more than the characters do for so long before it becomes irritating. On the other hand, there were a lot of unusual dilemmas raised, and it was never boring.
